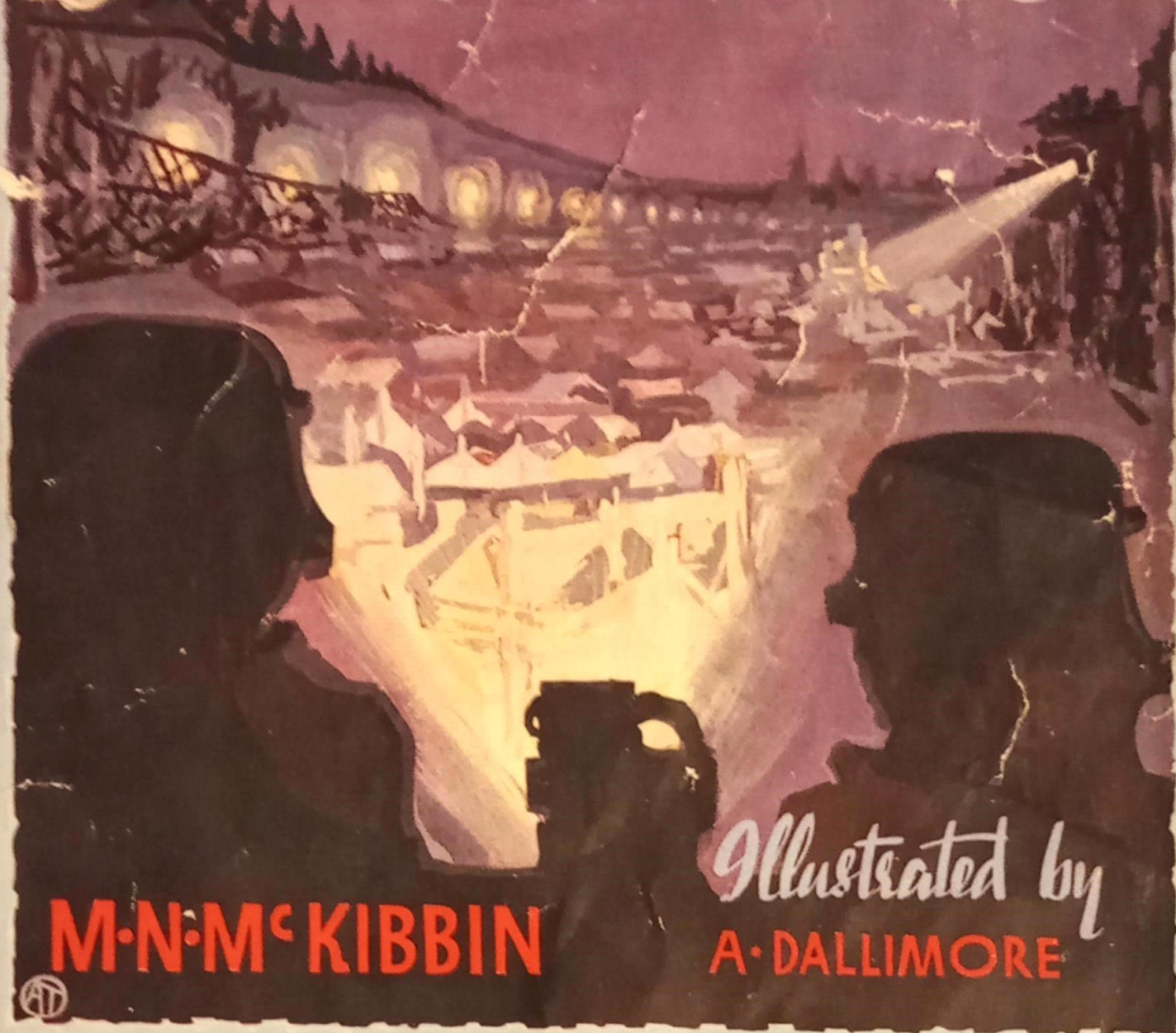


Forged Wire
memories
OF STALAG 383



M·N·M^cKIBBIN

Illustrated by
A·DALLIMORE

A STAPLES



PUBLICATION

Barbed Wire

Memories of STALAG 383

by M. N. McKIBBIN

Illustrated by A. G. DALLIMORE

THIS IS A GLANCE INTO A STRANGE world – the isolated world of a prison camp. It is a picture of Stalag 383, Hohenfels, Bavaria. It is the story of British NCO's who wouldn't work for Hitler.

These men were of all types and temperaments, from many parts of the world, and if the life they led as prisoners was as drab as a Stalag blanket in some respects, it was as colourful as a patchwork quilt in others.

Their many tunnels and secret radios, their endless duels with the Nazi 'snoops,' their rackets and relations with the *Wehrmacht* guards, their gambling dens and stills, dance halls and theatres, queer clubs and schools – all these were as much part of Stalag life as were the months of cold and hunger and boredom when they had little save their faith in the Red Cross to sustain them.

And it is the odd, the humorous and the dramatic aspects of Stalag life which prevail in this vivid record, though the tougher side is well presented too.

Both M. N. McKibbin, the author, and A. G. Dallimore, the illustrator of the book, were prisoners at Stalag 383. Their picture of the life there is objective and authentic. It is a worthy record of their comrades, a warm tribute to the Red Cross – and, above all, a highly entertaining human document.

BARBED WIRE

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The warm thanks of all ex-prisoners of war are due to the Red Cross Society, to whose funds a portion of the proceeds of this book will be devoted.



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Morning in Bed

THE 'Siberia of Deutschland' the Huns call it – and, Nazis or not, they're pretty right.

From my top bunk, I can just see through the frost-smearred windows of the hut. Yes, the snow-clad pines on the valley slopes, the grim silhouettes of the watch towers, the massive double fences of barbed wire, and the ramshackle rows of icebound huts, do have a touch of the cinema Siberia.

According to Goebbels' guide books, the Stalag is situated in a Bavarian valley, about ninety miles from Munich. According to six thousand of us, the camp is stuck in a frozen swamp, goddam miles from anywhere. We expect a prison camp to be depressing. This place exceeds our expectations.

Just outside the wire, I can see a Hun on guard. 'Toadstool,' we call him – a pet name he's proud of – but in his sentry's topcoat, which goes over his greatcoat, weighs a ton, and flares at the ankles, he looks more like a



tent. He's pegged down firmly by two pairs of boots – the outer pair like a couple of barges – and he's glaring glumly through the wire – frozen, bored, and cursing in his heart. He even envies us in our little wooden huts.

But just now, Toadstool, we've got little laugh on you. I, for instance, with my balaclava, greatcoat and mittens on; my legs swathed in old pants and stuck in a kitbag; my two transparent, *ersatz* blankets around me; and only my clogs removed as a nod to bed, feel just as cold as you do – and look a damn sight odder. I'd give a smoke for that 'maternity style' topcoat of yours.

For the cold in here is a cold to chill the heart. While my fingers will hold the pencil, let me solemnly write down that all Hun prison camps are refrigerators – refrigerators, of course, minus grub – but that for sheer mind-numbing, soul-shrivelling, paralysing cold, Hohenfels, this winter, outfreezes the lot.

This place – Hut Sixteen, Nine Company – is typical of the four hundred others inside the cage. The asbestos lining of the walls is coated with ice. So is the roof. There are icicles on the few remaining hut beams, and there are cakes of snow and ice on the floor. Suspended grotesquely from lines all ways across the room are shirts and pants frozen as stiff as boards. Some of them have been 'drying' for weeks.

But it's not that, nor the sheet of ice on the just washed table, that chills my spine – it's Bert Gilbert's ears. Bert is one of my muckers – we share grub on days when we eat – and he wears, permanently, a sort of blue woollen skull cap, strung together out of old socks by Alf Tuck, our mutual mucker.

Bert's propped up in bed two yards from me and, fence me in for ever, but his cap looks like a balaclava. That's how blue his ears are!

There are fourteen men still breathing in here – most of them, head under blankets, barely doing that. We're all N.C.O.s – genuine or self-promoted – we all refuse to work for Jerry – and now, at least, we couldn't really work for anybody. I've said we're cold: I'll add we're hungry. There are times when understatement saves a lot of lurid words.

For the camp has reached low ebb. Out of parcels; out of fags; out of fuel – and out of action. Organized activities have had to go. The school is now a barrack-room; the concert hall a hospital. The sports field is closed; the icy roads unwalkable. None but a fool would use the gym. Some are too weak to stand on their pins.

So here, hutbound, we stick, counting the hours crawl on to soup, and killing time as best we may. We're not downhearted – much; but we're empty-bellied, razor-nerved, and sick with hope deferred. We've lived here all our lives – and the world outside the wire is just a myth.

At one end of the hut there are double doors and a single window, largely boarded up. At the other are two part-broken windows looking on the camp. All along the walls are the two-tiered bunks we rot in. The middle of the room holds a table, forms, and a massive, mocking stove. Icicles festoon the stovepipe – sometimes, when the fire's on.

Under the bottom beds, there's a clearance of a foot, and this space is used for storing kit, and for sweeping the dirt under when you're room orderly.

Today's orderly is Frank Moore. He might have used a broom while I wasn't looking – but there's no evidence of it. But you can't keep a joint like this clean anyway. By the time you've finished scraping the ice off the floor with an iron bar, your thirteen room-mates, and sundry visitors, have trodden the lot, and more, back again. So you just go through the motions of doing something, moaning bitterly about the slovenliness of others in a bid to ward off cracks against yourself.

The difference between Frank and other orderlies is that Frank does his growling through a wolf skin. Yes . . . a neck-to-ankles, brown and shaggy wolf skin.

In the days of Red Cross parcels, when the camp was still alive, Frank was wig-maker to the 'National Theatre' – a 'creator of coiffures' for the female impersonators out of teased-cut string. For the last Xmas pantomime, he made a complete skin for the wolf in 'Red-Riding Hood' – and played the part himself.

Now he wears it, tail and all, as a boudoir suit. In his present half-starved condition – he's four stones under weight – he doesn't need a skin on to look like a wolf, but we lift our balaclavas to the things that wolf skin stands for: guts and perseverance at a time when work was tough.

'Got a bit of toilet paper, Mac?' says the wolf surprisingly. 'I found a couple of bumpers when I swept under my bed, but I've got no paper for a fag.'

'Don't give us that stuff about sweeping under the beds, Frank,' I say, handing him a tin with the precious paper and a razor blade to cut it with, 'and just put a spot of mint tea in there, and I'll have a smoke myself.'

Rather disgustedly, Frank gives me a fistful of the strange twigs and leaves the Huns dole out as tea, and with that and the toilet paper I roll a fat cigar.

'Got a light, Mac?' asks Frank, knowing damn well I haven't, and looking hopefully at Jim Tyre, the Aussie, who, he knows damn well, has.

Jim's expression of Christian resignation as he puts aside his chess problem is straight from Fox's 'Book of Martyrs.'

'One of these days,' he breathes restrainedly, 'one of you jokers will get a lighter of your own. Then I really will go nuts and scream! That's the fourteenth light I've handed out this morning!'

Yes, it's tough on Jim, all right, being the only man in the hut with a lighter. There's one other fellow with enough cigs to buy a lighter at one of the marts, but he only got the cigs in the first place by selling his lighter. So where are you?

I don't enjoy the Flor de Mint cigar. It gives off pungent, incense-like fumes all over the hut, but after the first two drags it tastes like fertilizer. Mint tea ranks just above spud peelings and well below tea leaves in Stalag favour, but it's definitely better as a smoke than as a drink. You don't have to get up ten times a night if



Parcels . . . what's that about parcels?

you've only smoked the stuff. Odd how these ersatz drinks upset the human body without affecting Huns in any way.

Alf Tucker, my second mucker, keeps glaring up from his bottom bunk – first at Bert and then at me. I know what he wants, so I just go on scribbling this down, and frowning busily.

'Well . . . what about it?' he says.

'What about what?' I ask.

'You know bloody well!' says Alf, fixing me with baleful eyes.

'But, Alf . . . there's no water . . . the tea leaves have been used three times. Anyway, they're frozen and . . .'

'There's plenty of snow out there, isn't there?' Alf cuts in. 'Where do you think you are – the Ritz or somewhere? Okay then. Just go on writin' poems. Joe Muggins will make the brew – as usual!'

And taking a jug made out of Klim tins, Alf puts on a pair of clogs, also made from Klim tins, slams out of the hut and arouses the surly suspicions of Toadstool by scooping up snow from the virgin carpet just inside the warning wire. It's part of the ritual in our domestic triangle that Alf does the cooking for all, while professing indignation that Bert and I don't rush to help him. It would break his heart if we did.

It's now about ten o'clock on Tuesday or Wednesday morning, and ever since roll call at half-past eight I've been dimly conscious of a

sawing on my nerves; of something other than hunger pangs gnawing at me. I now realize what it is. It's Bert learning Spanish. He's reading the phrases from a textbook in a sing-song sort of mutter which will surely drive me nuts. Jim Tyre's not keen about it, either.

'Is that lingo hard to talk, Bert? It's bloody hard to listen to,' he remarks.

There's a vague rustling beneath the blankets as the bored bed-bounds wait for a retort. Anything to break the monotony, even an argument – though God knows they're no novelty in here. But the re-entry of Alf with the first load of snow wards off nervy words.

'Another bloke's blacked out by the latrine,' he announces. 'They're carrying him down to his hut. And Jerry's playing two-up already. Just our blasted luck if the Yanks bomb our parcel wagons at Regensburg!'

Black-outs, due to hunger, are not news. There were dozens on roll call this morning. Nor are air raids, indicated by there being two Huns atop each watch tower, any novelty. But the pregnant word 'parcels' rouses the room like a cookhouse call. Heads emerge from blankets like rabbits from their holes.

'Parcels . . . what's that about parcels?' says one. 'I dreamt last night that they were on the way. Must be getting a bit psychic lately!'

'Psychic? . . . you're not psychic, Chum,' scoffs another, 'you're just a sucker. That wagons at Regensburg griff was started by Hamburg

Harry. Never trust a squarehead while he's breathing!

'I'd sooner be a sucker than a gloomy buzzard!' flares the psychic one, 'and it's not Hamburg Harry I'm trusting—it's the Red Cross. Pity some of you gloomy guys don't appreciate what's done for you!'

That does it. There's not a man amongst us wouldn't sooner own to treason than to ingratitude to the Red Cross—that watchful second mother to us all. So the cynic and the psychic one get really rude. They each enlist supporters, and in a matter of moments half the hut are at each others throats on the all-absorbing question: when and how will Red Cross parcels reach us.

Pessimists, by temperament or pose, irritate the optimists, and vice versa. Would be 'balanced thinkers' enrage both. Insults are batted about like shuttlecocks—families, regiments and religions all being dragged in—but there are no fights. No one's got the energy . . . and even the dimmest realize that words just now mean nothing.

Unintelligible as the squabbling might be to an outsider, ignoble as it seems to ourselves, it serves to stem off apathy. We've all got food on the mind just now, and we can't attempt to hide it. Better to argue about it than to lie all day and mope. That way, madness lies.

And the row's soon over, anyway. Someone makes a crack . . . somebody else laughs . . . nerves relax all round . . . and the talk becomes quite matey. It's still about grub—nothing else quite registers—but it's now wistful reminiscences of mother's puddings, or starry-eyed eulogies of the wife's pancakes. Soon, someone will produce a written-out menu. Then I'll have to show him mine. It's the oldest Stalag custom of the lot.

Alf, who having started the argument traditionally ignores it, has now collected enough snow for his purpose, and again he turns a baleful glare on me.

'Well . . . what about it?' he says, sticking to the formula.

'What about what?' I say, taking my cue.

'Fuel,' says Alf. 'It's going to take a helluva lot of something to make a brew-up.'

'We've got a parcel lid left,' I say, without conviction. 'Where would I get fuel from, anyway?'

'We need that parcel lid to collect the swede peelings,' says Alf. 'Otherwise there's damn-all for grub tonight. I'll start the fire with them poems, and then I'll want one of your bed boards. And that's it!'

I don't need to answer the last bit. There's a series of contortions from the bed beneath mine, and John Newby, Liverpool man with an Irish bone somewhere, clears himself for action.

'Burn bedboards me foot!' he splutters. 'One more board from that bed, and it's meself Mac will be crashing through on. You're not sane—you must be —— to talk so daft, Alf!'

Bottom bunkers are understandably sensitive about bed boards. Suspended, like the sword of Damocles, above them are a number of nasty-edged wooden slats, and a human body. Accidents will happen—in fact they always do if you play around with bed boards—and when that body drops like a bomb in the still of night . . . it's annoying for both parties. It's been known to lead to 'words.'

But now the whole talk turns to bed collapses, and most of us have got a yarn to tell—usually with Lamsdorf (the notorious Stalag VIII B) as the setting.

There we had three-tiered wooden bunks, precious few bed boards, and too many fuel filchers and practical jokers. It was an almost nightly performance for some innocent top bunker to crash through to the middle bunk, then, together with his new bedmate, drop in on the third sleeping beauty below. As the trio would then have to sort themselves out in the darkness, the language, at least, was apt to be illuminating.

Well, the outcome of this chatty little interlude is that we all agree that bed board burning is the last card in the pack, but that fuel is nevertheless vital from somewhere. So, after a short debate, we decide to burn some more of the hut—and damn the consequences.

Already we've burnt enough beams to give the roof a sag. Already there are gales whistling through crevices where the side supports have been removed. But we're still well behind some huts in the home burning line. In one room I know, they've burnt most of their beds, both their forms, and the legs of their table. The table is suspended by ropes from the roof, and swings dizzily while the inmates stand up to eat their soup from it.

Other places have carried out 'improvements' by burning a complete wall, persuading their neighbours to do likewise, and making the two huts into one by fixing a tin roof - made from Klim tins - over the space between them.

Why Jerry doesn't open up with a Spandau is a mystery. In some camps we've been, the Hun was so touchy about his property that fellows have been slung in the cooler for fixing a clothes line to a roof beam, while using a nail as a coat hook was considered a serious act of sabotage.

But, quicker than I can write it down, Charley Patterson, Kiwi machine gunner, and Fred Perry of the R.E.s, have unbolted one of the massive beams that support the roof; it's been sawn into fourteen lengths with a *verboten*



saw, made out of an old spring bed stay, and Alf has chopped up one of our blocks with a *verboten* axe pinched from the Jerry stores. The roof still stands, but it droops quite a bit, and we'll have to watch our heads in a heavy fall of snow.

'Got a light please, Jim?' says Alf.

Jim groans pitifully, puts aside his chess, and ignites some pages of 'Mein Kampf,' thoughtfully provided by Goebbels.

'Take the perishin' fire outside, for Pete's sake,' he says. 'I'm not handing out lights all day to be smoked and stunk to death in my own bed!'

Holding the 'Smoky Joe' portable fire in one hand, and frantically adding chips of wood to the flames, Alf scurries to the sort of vestibule between the two doors, calling the room to witness how those 'paralysed punks' - that's Bert and me - just lie and watch him.

There, aided by some language, and two or three further lights from Jim, he proceeds to boil the snow up. Twice he pops his head round the door, once to inform us that he's burnt his frostbitten fingers on the 'Smoky Joe,' once to suggest that if his muckers aren't suffering too severely from 'ingrowing bed boards,' perhaps they'd like to scrape out the mugs, which have still got last night's mint tea frozen in them.

Bert does this job while I get busy - watching Fred Perry make a spare 'Smoky Joe.' These 'smokeless heaters,' as the inventor calls them, or 'heatless smokers,' as everyone else calls them, play a big part in Stalag life. Made, of course, from Klim tins, they work - if they do - on the principle of an incinerator, there being an air space between an inner lining of smaller tins which converts the fumes, or something, into a gas flame.

They burn paper, cardboard, or wood, and properly handled are efficient, but they easily get choked - then so does everyone else. With three or four going at once, we often get a smoke screen worthy of the fleet - under cover of which, those gaping holes were burnt in the floor.

Today, it takes Alf and the 'Smoky Joe' about forty minutes to convert the snow and leaves into a liquid not easily describable in culinary terms.

'I hope it rots your guts,' he says, handing us

up our Klim tin mugs – and it very likely will. It's earthy and smoky and vaguely medicinal in taste, but it's hot and wet, and just to cup the mug in your hands is a luxury.

'Good old Alf,' say Bert and I. 'Thank God we've got a cook in the family,' and, between sips, we remind each other of the last real meal we tasted – Alf's Xmas dinner.

This beautiful blow-out, saved up for months on end while we were still getting part of a parcel, included a cake made from off-grey flour racketed from the Huns. Alf's recipes are secret, but perhaps they include concrete, for, as he modestly claimed at the time: 'No one could make a heavier cake than this – not even if they'd took a cookery course.'

Yes, it was a great cake, all right, and the fortnight's nightmares and the two visits to the M.I. room for enemas that it cost one of the syndicate seem, retrospectively, well worth while.

The fact is that any form of indigestion is better than lack of digestion due to there being nothing in particular to digest. Someone in here, a bit worriedly, asked some intimate questions round the room. He was relieved to find that other fellows, too, were functioning about once in every six days – which biological detail must account for the strange dearth of rumours lately, Radio Latrine being the main source of all the weirdest.

Not that we go for long without a few titbits to discuss. Jack Welch, non-smoker, who wisely buys food with the cigs he saves, is still fit enough to walk round the camp – though how he avoids breaking his neck on the icy slopes is beyond us.

'What's the griff, Jack – any parcel news?' someone shoots at him, the second he returns from his morning slide.

Jack kicks his boots against the stove. 'Joe's taken a thousand towns and villages. Someone's torn down half the top latrine for firewood. The Western offensive looks like starting. It's swede soup again today. One of the working Froggies has been shot by a Hun civvy for pinching spuds. Ginger Darling's put a notice . . .'

'Nothing about parcels, then?' breaks in an anxious voice.

'For Gawd's sake shut up about parcels!' rebukes another. 'You put the mockers on the parcels coming – the way you worry about 'em. Carry on, Jack . . .'

'Ginger Darling's put up a notice, challenging the bloke who ate his cat to a fight. Guards will fire without warning on post pinchers – that means you, Charley. The dust cart driver wants two pairs of new pyjamas for a loaf. Winston's supposed to be making a special announcement tonight. The news about parcels is nix – and, if anyone's interested, the snoops are next door. They'll be here any sec.'

At this last item, Charley automatically slips the axe and saw under his pallasse, Frank sweeps some tell-tale sawdust down a hole in the floor, and Alf kicks the newly sawn beam lengths under the beds.

'Here they come,' says Frank shortly, 'scraping their boots first, too. More thought for the orderly than some human beings!'

And, sure enough, the doors opens to two of the Fuehrer's most faithful ferrets – Mr. Moto and the Jeep.

'Morgen' they greet us tonelessly, closing the door behind them and glancing round the room. They stare, but do not smile, at Frank's weird wolf skin garb.

'Morning' we answer, with equal warmth, guessing at once that this is just a routine call – not a pukka search for tunnels, radios, weapons, &c.

Mr. Moto's strange, slant eyes today lack zest. He prods aimlessly about the floor with his iron probe, shifts some kitbags in the corner, puts them back, then raises the lid of our huge and useless stove.

'There's sweet Fanny Adams in there, Mate!' says someone bitterly. 'What about sending your side-kick for a spot of coal. Yes, 'im with the 'eadphones on.'

This crack about the black ear warmers the Jeep is wearing brings some chuckles from the bunks, and both Mr. Moto and the Jeep are notoriously allergic to laughter. Therefore they get officious.

'Aufladen!' says Mr. Moto, pointing to the very obvious trapdoor in the floor, and meaning that he wants someone to open it up.

'Nix ferstin!' says Alf, and everyone else within range. 'Nix ferstin' is pidgin Deutsch for 'don't understand' and is our automatic answer to most Hun orders.

So, seething slightly, Moto and the Jeep have to do the job themselves, which involves taking down the dirty stove-pipe, shifting the mighty

stove and the cement slab it stands on, and levering up the yards-long section of floorboards with iron bars.

They're not really interested . . . only being awkward. They know from previous probes that the trapdoor hides no tunnel. We cut it last summer to reach some kittens who were growing up wild between the double floors of the hut. At that time the space between the floors was packed with glass wool, ticklish to handle, but cosy for cats.

Now, to our sorrow, there's no second floor to speak of. Some of the boards have been burnt by ourselves; some have been filched by our ever-loving neighbours. Only round the sides, beneath the bed positions, are there still some boards and packing. Bottom bunkers guard these with their lives.

So the floor-raising act by Moto and the Jeep makes things kind of draughty – a fact we let them know in bitter chorus.

'Kalt, Ja?' jeers the Jeep, propping up the trap with the bar we use as scraper, and not

even pretending to be interested in the cavity below.

'Ja, of course it's cold, Birdbrains!' snorts Frank, 'What's the Deutsch for "put it back and scam"? Here, you speak the lingo, Bert. Tell 'em what we think of 'em!'

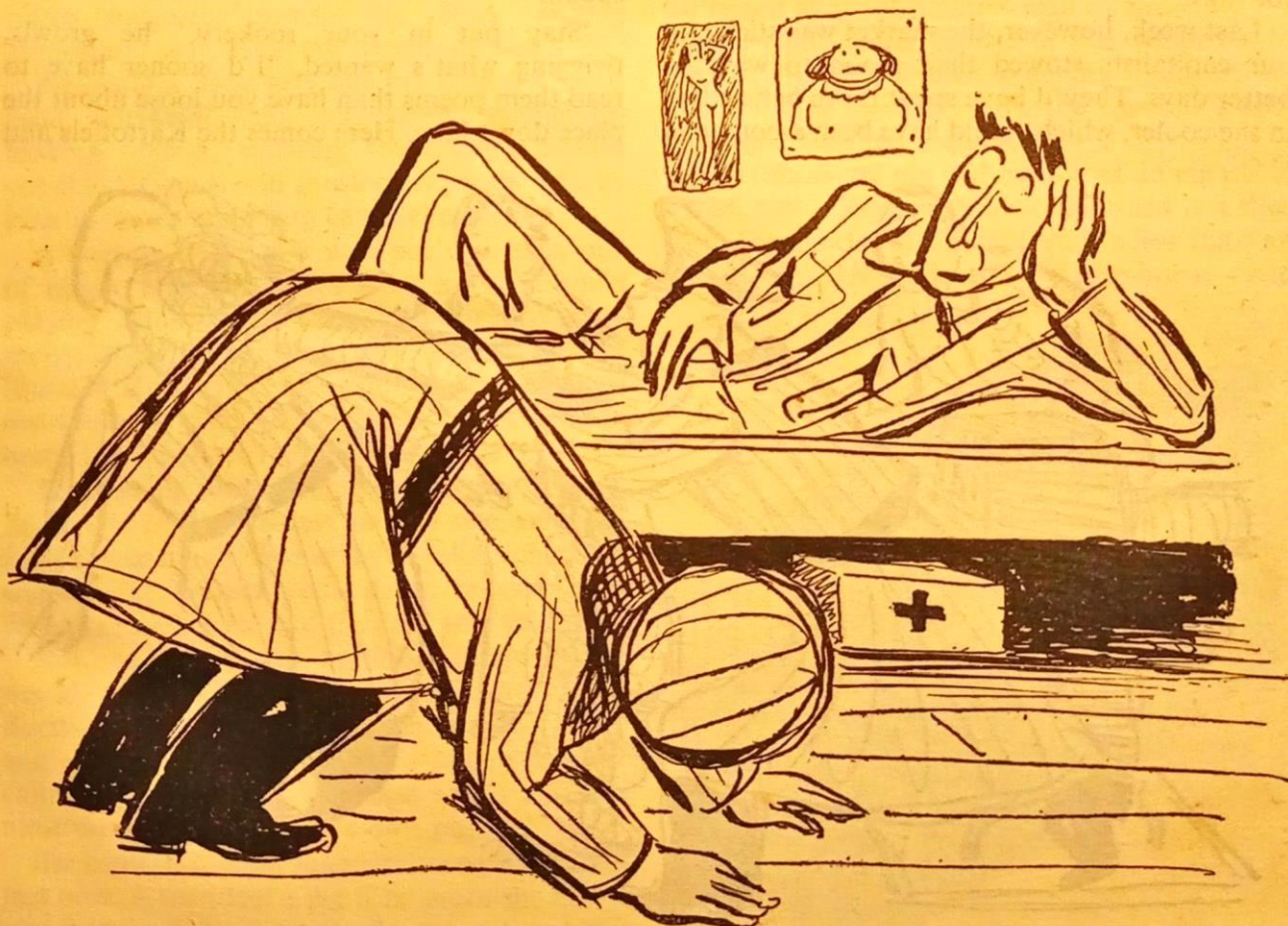
'They know,' says Bert, 'they're not as dumb as all that.'

And I don't suppose they are. Moto, I think, knows every word we say. His oriental blandness gets some pretty nasty tests, but, born snoop that he is, he'll suffer any insult rather than reveal his grasp of English – the secret of his now and then successes.

'Komm!' he orders the Jeep, and the pair of them quit the hut, despite Frank's invitation that they crawl down the hole they've left, and rot.

And there's two men, at least, who're glad they don't accept.

'Charley,' chortles John Newby, as the door slams to, 'you and me've got the luck of the devil, the both of us! What are they after think-



ing, those Huns, not even to take a dekkow down there?'

'John,' says Charley, in his cool, dry manner 'a Hun doesn't think. It wouldn't be a Hun if it did. But now it's kindly opened up our store, I vote we carry on with sawing up the posts. I've got a customer in mind . . .'

And now the penny's dropped, and I realize what's happened.

Charley and John - shipping clerk and lorry driver, respectively, in private life, talented gangsters here - work a rather risky racket. They slip out at dark, dodge the watch tower searchlights, and with axe, pick and saw attack the inter-compound fence posts. They trust to luck to miss a bullet, and every now and then they stagger home in triumph, bearing on their shoulders the ten foot posts - the calibre of telegraph poles.

We'll hear a tap on the back window - the front of this hut being inconveniently near a sentry post - and, as we turn out the light and open up the blackout, the massive poles come through, usually to be sawn up quickly and sold for fags.

Last week, however, the market was sticky, so our capitalists stowed their wood to wait for better days. They'd have spent those better days in the cooler, which would have been a bore, and

they'd have lost their hard-earned posts, which would have been worse, had the snoops probed properly down the trap.

So, one way and another, they're lucky tykes; but they're voted by one and all to deserve their luck, and they respond by presenting the hut with one of the posts to burn - a princely gift, indeed, in these bleak days.

And now things start to stir - including bed-bounds who haven't stirred all morning - for the high spot of the day is drawing near.

'Rations up, Sixteen. Draw your Uncle Ned!' bawls a cockney voice outside; and while Frank gets the bread from the company office, and Fred draws the spuds from the cookhouse, the rest of us get ready for the soup - by which I mean we set our bowls and spoons out, readiness for soup in other respects being our permanent condition.

My own bowl - a shallow, oblong dish made from a biscuit tin - is already on the table, but it's a break for me that Alf's around, or I'd have to get out of my kitbag to look for my spoon.

'Stay put in your rookery,' he growls, twiggling what's wanted, 'I'd sooner have to read them poems than have you loose about the place down here. Here comes the Kartoffels and



the Uncle Ned, and there goes the bugle for loop the loop – so stick up there till you've had it!

Which I will. And, thanks to Alf, a gracious lad at heart, I can now describe a ceremony – not, perhaps, a romantic, historic, or even edifying ceremony, but certainly a ceremony of much interest to all in Hut Sixteen: to wit, the dishing out of grub.

The High Priests of this ceremony are Jack and Bill Welch – brothers, redheads, sergeants in the Rifle Brigade, and survivors of the gory Calais landing in May, 1940.

Jack is the present hut commander, and Bill the official 'cutter-upper,' acknowledged by one and all to have a keen eye and sure judgment when it comes to cutting up the rations.

Having been busy all morning in pressing his pants beneath his paliasse, Bill is robed for his present office in long woollen underpants, and four or five jerseys of varied lengths and colours. He slaps his arms around his back for a few minutes to restore his circulation, looks for an ice-free spot on the table, then picks up a knife, and with the most fearful grimaces of concentrated judgment attacks the black oblong *Wehrmacht* loaf. He'll cut it right or bust!

Meanwhile, Jack sets out the potatoes – and what potatoes! Old, misshapen, malignant-looking objects, suffering from every disease possible to spuds – in fourteen separate lots, as even as much reshifting can make them.

A portion of bread is now put with each pile of spuds, and Jack takes from his shelf some playing cards specially reserved for this ceremony. They consist of two similar sets of fourteen different cards, and while one set is distributed, a card face upwards on each ration heap, the other set is shuffled and cut.

Then, going round the room in order of beds, Jack calls out our names, one by one, turns up a card from the shuffled set as he calls each name, and, voila! there's your day's rations – that little heap by the twin of the card you've drawn.

Not, as I said, an uplifting ceremony. It would, we admit, be nicer, more courtly, less Borstalian, if the food were left on the table, and a man just helped himself – taking care, of course, to choose the rottenest spuds and the most dubious bread for his own portion.

But contests in table manners are embarrassing just now. A man feel a pig if he grabs the best – and a prig if he doesn't. So we cut out the

trimmings and trust to the cards. And what could be fairer than that?

'... John ... three of spades ... Mac ... eight of spades,' calls Jack, dealing the cards deliberately – and 'put them poems away!' shouts Alf, grabbing my winnings and plonking them on my bed.

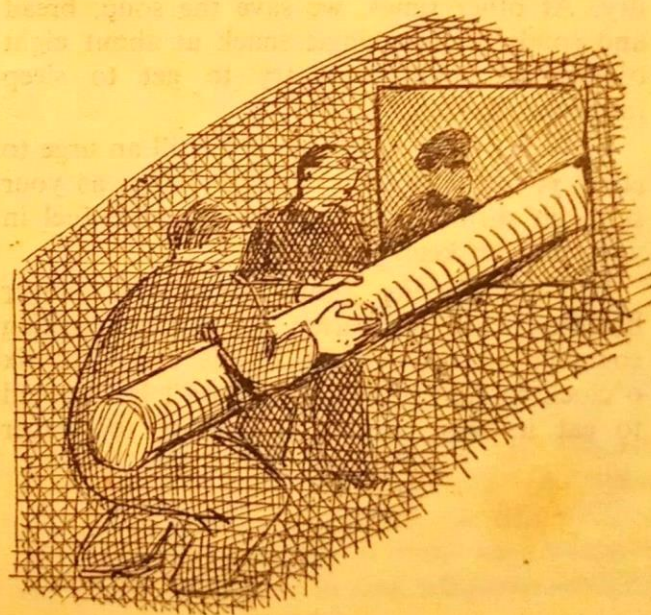
'Well ... would you Adam and Eve it!' he trails off, open-mouthed, as a long familiar wailing fills the air, cutting out the music of the cookhouse call.

Yes, we believe it, Alf. In fact, we've come to expect it. Those sirens seem to wait for soup each day. Their urgent howling now means – A: that Flying Fortresses are near – probably heading for the Messerschmidt works at Regensburg – and B: less inspiringly, that soup is likely to be delayed for a bit.

For the Huns discourage movement while an air raid is on. The Kommandant accuses us of 'congregating in groups and cheering during daylight raids' – which, of course, we do – and 'signalling with flashlights to aircraft at night' – which I hope we don't, though Lord knows we're not short of lunatics who might.

But, while some crowd to the windows to stare at the sky, I must keep my mind on my job, which is to write down the Fuehrer's idea of a good feed for Englanders.

The rations on my bed consist of an eighth of a loaf, and a few evil spuds. The bread is a slice from the middle of the loaf and is less than an inch thick. The spuds are five in number – two



the size of walnuts . . . one as big as an egg . . . and the other two of fairish size, but foul appearance. Yes, I was afraid of that. One of them on being broken open is black-rotted throughout. The other, thank you, Adolf, has edible portions.

According to the Jerry diet sheet, we should also have had an issue of *ersatz* margarine – but according to the Jerry quartermaster, there just isn't any margarine to issue. So, one way and another, we've had it!

At a generous estimate, then, we have the equivalent of two normal spuds and a doorstep of bread to fill our bellies till tomorrow. That, and a cupful of swede soup – but as Jim Tyre once remarked, swedes are a drink for cows . . . not nourishment for men. They're ninety-nine point something, just water.

If I could play Boswell to the various Johnsons now holding forth about Hun rations, I might add something to the literature of invective. As it is, I've got a grave personal problem to solve before the soup comes up. Shall I, or shall I not, eat my bread and spuds with the soup?

If I do, then I've got twenty-four interminable hours without a bite, perhaps tortured by the sight of other blokes eating this evening. If I don't, then I get not the slightest relief for my present pangs, and will certainly have the grub on my mind till I do scoff it.

Sometimes, when there's a margarine issue with the bread, we save the spuds till evening, fry them in the margarine, and eat the bread dry. At other times, we save the soup, bread and spuds for one single snack at about eight o'clock at night, and try to get to sleep immediately after.

However you work it, you've still an urge to chew your boots; you still feel pangs as your stomach shrinks; and you've no more fuel in your tank to keep you going.

But its got its funny side, this hunger business. There's Charley, for instance, asking someone to take charge of his bread till six o'clock so that he, Charley, won't be tempted to eat it, then, noting the rather too eager

acceptance of his request, deciding not to chance it, but to get it down his neck at once.

Then there are others of the 'neck or nothing' temperament, who've already scoffed the last crumb of their bread, and are now looking with the oddest mixture of scorn and admiration at the 'use your nut' canny school, who slice their eighths of a loaf into enough razor-thin slices to last for four 'meals' a day.

Best turn of the 'neck or nothing' boys is on Saturdays, when we are issued with two days' rations at once. They eat the lot in five minutes, then, with fearful curses on Hitler, retire to bed – there to lie the rest of the day, all day Sunday, and till mid-day on Monday, breadless but stoical.

To counter this feat, the 'use your nut' party take a particular pride in saving a crumb or two of their bread from day to day. 'What! rations up already?' they ask maddeningly. 'We've still got a slice left from yesterday!' and the only consolation the rest of us have is that the canny ones are just as spindle-legged and hollow-cheeked as we are.

But the Fortresses have passed . . . there's movement in the camp . . . Frank has got the soup by now . . . and I've made my great decision. I shall . . .

'Well . . . what about it!' a voice breaks in.

'What about what?' I say, a trifle peeved.

'What about grub, of course. What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to eat my spuds with my soup, Alf, and save my bread till tonight.'

'No you bloody well aren't!' says Alf. 'This syndicate's got swede peelings for supper. What did I tell you about that parcel lid?'

'Alf,' I say with feeling, 'you're the very prince of muckers . . . you're a chef above all chefs . . . If there's anything I can do . . .'

'You can cut out the bull to begin with,' says Alf, 'and you can do me just one favour.'

'Speak!' I say.

'Stick them poems somewhere, and get stuck in your Uncle Ned!'

'Alf,' I say, and mean, 'that's a very lovely thought.'

White Angels

AS that last winter of war limped grimly on, the position at Hohenfels grew serious. Day after day the meagre rations dwindled; soon they seemed likely to cease altogether; and with Allied bombers blasting the railways, with *Wehrmacht* food dumps blown sky high, and with Prussian refugees swamping Bavaria, one fact was pretty plain – non-working prisoners-of-war were last in line for German food.

And food was needed badly. There were still some foul potatoes in the clamps, though they would not last for long; there were still some swedes and water for the mid-day cup of soup; and there was still our daily bread – a loaf between eight men.

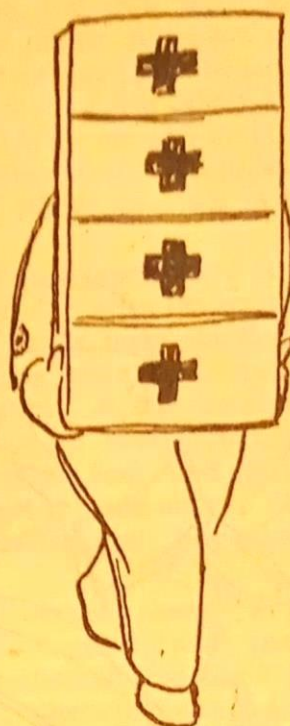
But there was precious little else – and it was not enough. Thousands of men were weakening rapidly . . . the hospitals were full to overflowing . . . the huts seemed peopled by queer, gaunt strangers . . . and an epidemic might have swept the camp like wildfire.

Major Neal, the Senior British Medical Officer, and his brother doctors, grappled with this danger, while S.Q.M.S. David MacKenzie, the camp leader, battled with the Germans on our behalf.

Had blood been drawable from stones, MacKenzie would have wrung food from the Germans, for no grander fighter, no better diplomat than this shrewd Scot ever served his fellows.

But to all demands the Germans had an answer: an answer audible to all – the Allied bombers. Daily, huge fleets of planes sailed overhead – so calmly bound for Nazi strongholds that even Huns gaped admiration – and every bomb they dropped was another German alibi; another good excuse for withholding vital food.

Nuremberg and Munich, Regensburg and Ulm – all these Nazi cities were centres of supply; all, declared the Germans, might once have fed the camp; and all in turn were shattered from the air. Shattered like our hopes of German aid.



So, once again it all summed up to this: the hopes, the health, the very *lives*, of several thousand men were hanging on a thread – the thread of Red Cross parcels. If parcels reached the camp, then the men's worst trials were over. If they didn't reach it soon, then for some *all* trials were over. Matters were as desperate as that.

And the odds against the parcels mounted daily. There was firm faith in the will of the Red Cross to send us aid, but there was bitter knowledge of the obstacles in their path: and as the days crawled on and the bombs sloped down and the Red Army sprawled across Prussia, it seemed less and less likely that the *Reich* railways would carry parcels, instead of troops and guns.

It was now that the *realists*, as they styled themselves, had their say. Since no parcels had reached us for six months, they argued, how could we reasonably hope for parcels now? We knew that all things possible had been done. That MacKenzie had written and wired to Geneva, and that Mr. Berg of the Swedish Y.M.C.A., our good friend, had acted as a courier on our behalf. We knew that the Red Cross – with many other Stalags to feed – were aware of our plight. We had even seen telegrams advising



Blackout!

the despatch by rail of Red Cross parcels. But that was weeks and weeks ago, and even if those wagons had not been plundered by the Germans or smashed in a bomber raid they would, at best, be stuck in a siding, there to wait till the war was over.

Face the facts, urged the *realists*, and get out of the Stalag while there was yet time. Volunteer to work for Jerry – they would have to feed us then. Hunger we had known before – most of us had gone months without parcels in the early days – but this was different. German rations were lower now than they had ever been, while four or five years of Stalag life had weakened our reserves. Let the bread ration fail for just a few days, as well it might, and we were sunk.

And why not volunteer for farm work, anyway? It wouldn't save the Nazis at this stage, but it might well save some of us – and there was no bigger fool than a needless martyr!

Thus argued a small section of the camp – perhaps one man in every hut – and since these *realists* were by no means always the faintest hearted, they were not unduly despised for their viewpoint. In fact, they were much less unpopular than the consciously heroic.

'I'd sooner starve to death than work for the enemy!' declared one of these latter prigs dramatically.

'You'd sooner starve to death than work for anybody, Chum!' retorted a *realist*, and the grins that followed showed that most of us realized that we had mixed motives for our 'won't work' attitude.

Nevertheless, not to withhold credit from the bulk of the camp, it must be recorded that through thick and thin they stuck to their decision not to work for Hitler, a decision that commanded German respect though it did not produce German food.

There was little disposition to blame the Stalag Kommandant for our plight. This gross, good-humoured barrel of a man seemed more of a soldier than a Nazi, and his powers outside the camp were negligible. He admitted that we were short, dangerously short of food; he admitted that it was *Wehrmacht* responsibility to feed us; and, while regretting that there was little he could do about it under the circumstances, he seemed genuinely anxious that a miracle should happen and Red Cross parcels reach us.

Meanwhile, roll calls were practically cancelled, since efforts to count us were made farcical by about one man in ten collapsing on parade and four or five others having to carry him off, and life more and more resolved itself into a perpetual hibernation in bed – a hibernation broken mainly by visits to the icy wash-houses.

Due to frozen pipes, there were only brief intervals each day when the water was running, but it was during these ablution periods that the astonishing changes in men's physiques could be noticed. A few months on German rations seemed to have shrunk some men in frame as well as flesh, and their Gandhi-like limbs and torsos made an odd contrast to the pot bellies developed by years of potato excesses.

Odder still were the changes in physiognomy. Some men developed the puffy cheeks of hunger oedema and looked bloated, like Nazi caricatures of Churchill; others retained their normal contours, but took on a sort of luminously yellow tinge to the skin, while some of the weight-lifters, boxers and rugger players, whose normal mien was decidedly earthbound, were given by hollowed cheeks and hungry eyes an impressively *spiritual* appearance. Terry Daler, for instance, well known to the camp as an all-in-wrestler, and normally looking the part, developed the aspect of an Eastern mystic, so that when I visited his hut one day I was not surprised to find him reading tomes on Buddhism.

Reading, that winter, required almost Yogi-like powers of concentration and was not everybody's solace. Not only was it bitterly cold to keep one's chilblained fingers outside the blankets, but the brain seemed to have lost its normal receptive powers, so that the same page had to be read over and over again for its meaning to register. Most minds were so pre-occupied with food, anyway, that only descriptions of meals had any real interest. Dickens was naturally popular and Mrs. Beeton, if available, would have been a riot.

In the main, then, we didn't lie in bed and read – we just lay in bed. And it wasn't easy, even after the long practice enforced upon us at Hohenfels. Since for a great part of every year the camp grounds were either an unwalkable glazier or a knee-deep swamp, and since most huts contained only one small table to sit at, it

had always been the custom when hutbound to lie on one's bed for most of the time. But what had been borelessly bearable in the days of parcels, when we had been able to split the days up by making cups of cocoa occasionally, was a very different proposition now that we were out of eats and smokes and mail from home, and now that reading had lost its charm.

For some men, every hour seemed a day and every week a month. The combination of hunger, suspense and intolerable activity unbalanced them. A few became definitely 'mental' and required supervision, and more than a few reached a point where, without being insane, they were lacking in normal judgment and restraint.

These men talked wildly about a mass attempt at fighting our way out of the Stalag and depending upon Allied aircraft to drop us food and arms by parachute. They pointed to the new trenches and strong points that the *Wehrmacht* were building in positions commanding the camp, and they urged that it would be better to act at once before the posts got stronger and we got feebler.

Actually, of course, any such attempt would have been mass suicide in face of machine guns, mortars and the thousands of Hun troops stationed round about, which fact was demonstrated, silently but forcibly, on one of the now rare parades for roll call.

Some six thousand of us had assembled in companies in the great rectangular cage of the parade ground and were waiting, cold and cursing, for the usual handful of postens to count us. This morning, however, they shut the massive gates behind us and left us, for a spell, to our own devices. The comment was just passing round our ranks that the Jerry strong points and trenches outside the wire had been completed and were this morning strongly manned, when a company or so of Huns, other than our usual guards, appeared from nowhere and positioned themselves all around the outside perimeter of the parade ground - something which had never happened before. At the same time, the guards on top of the corner watch-towers were more in evidence than usual and the spouts of their Spandau machine guns unusually prominent.

For a short while, the atmosphere was tense, almost sinister. It was easy enough to make

cracks about this sudden display of armed might, but it was obviously not intended as a joke and the steel-helmeted company of Huns looked far from playful. Fortunately, we did not know of Hitler's current 'shoot prisoners-of-war' order or we would have been seriously uneasy about the situation. As it was, the thought entered many heads that, caged in as we were without any sort of cover or weapons, we could be wiped out in no time if the Nazi so desired, and perhaps the demonstration gave, and was intended to give, a sober hint to the reckless. No signs of uneasiness were displayed to the Huns, but we weren't sorry when the familiar Stalag postens eventually counted us and the parade was safely dismissed.

By that stage of the war, most prisoners had a strong prejudice in favour of preserving their lives, the theory being that with four or five years of captivity behind them it would be a pity to pass out now that the war was obviously on its last legs. Never, indeed, had life, or, rather, the prospects of life, seemed so sweet; and never had the phrase 'the struggle for existence' assumed such meaning.

There were a few hungry souls who scrambled daily round the refuse bins in search of food. God knows what food, for even swede peelings had long since been rationed and queued-for luxuries, but no doubt temperament drove them to action, however futile, to try and help themselves. The struggle of the vast majority, however, was confined to just hanging on grimly to their remnants of strength and to making sure that they got their exact share of the daily rations.

Justice in the distribution of food was an obsession, unblinking eyes in every hut watching each move of the quartermasters. Different rooms had different systems for sharing out the rations, some using home-made scales to weigh the bread and potatoes. One hut employed a different man each day to cut the bread. He was encouraged to cut the loaf into equal eighths by the knowledge that he, the breadcutter, would have last choice of the slices on the table. This system was said to be effective in eliminating light weight slices, but to be agonizingly slow to perform or watch.

In Hut Sixteen we stuck to the method I have described, the mainstays of which were Bill Welch's eye and a pack of cards. None could

dispute the essential fairness of the system, but one or two men had the fixed idea that day after day, by sheer ill luck, they drew the foulest portion of potatoes and the smallest piece of bread. Sometimes their nerves betrayed them into voicing this conviction, in which case they were promptly jumped upon, for moaners and self-pityers were definitely not popular.

Nor, on the other hand, were the determinedly cheerful, the 'keep smiling like me' characters. Unlike the naturally merry souls, who were a great blessing, these dutifully happy warriors were apt to be irritating, so that 'Lord preserve us from cheerful heroes' was an oft-breathed prayer.

The fact was that we knew each other too well. Years of unescapable intimacy under all sorts of conditions gave us X-ray insight into each other's characters and anything that seemed forced or phoney at that stage struck a peculiarly jarring note.

Jarring notes, indeed, were pretty common those days, and had the B.B.C., miraculously and ill-advisedly, contrived to broadcast 'Ten minutes in Stalag 383' there might have been more than strong language to shock listeners. There might have been the impression that cats and dogs could live in greater harmony than British prisoners and that some of us disliked each other far more than we did our Nazi gaolers.

And so we did – at times. The Nazis were starving us, of course, which was unfriendly of them; but they were a remote, impersonal force, represented only by the Stalag guards and snoops whose occasional visits to the hut were an interesting diversion. Our hutmates, on the other hand, were fine fellows at bottom and would share their last smoke with us, but in the meantime it was they, and not the Nazis, whose odd mannerisms, pet phrases, weird opinions and jarring voices were an active irritant for most of our waking hours.

There were the hut parrots, for instance. 'Ah, well, it's a grand life if you don't weaken!' a voice would proclaim as, perhaps, the snow drove through the window, and you could almost hear the teeth grinding beneath the blankets as the rest of the room tried to recall whether that was the fourteenth or the fifteenth time that morning that the same voice had registered the same great thought.

Or: 'I've got a hunch that parcels are on the way!' a phoney optimist would announce at intervals, whereupon his hutmates were left writhing at the thought that either he would poison all hopes of food reaching them at all, or that they might one day have to hear him congratulating himself on his wonderful foresight – both prospects being quite sickening.

Then there were the chronic arguers, who had the gift of turning the friendliest discussion into a violent row within two sentences, and there were the cross purpose pairs who, by not listening to each other, could argue for hours without discovering that they were both saying the same thing, their voices battling inanities endlessly to and fro across the room.

Perhaps the most maddening thing about these arguers was that they never chose their immediate neighbour to argue with. That might have given the rest of the room some peace. Instead, the fellow in bed seven, say, would start an argument with the fellow in bed five, while the unfortunate occupant of bed six, between them, would suffer all the tortures of the damned, sticking his fingers into his ears to cut out their voices and stuffing blankets into his mouth to avoid screaming at them. Usually, he would end by screaming at them anyway, whereupon his tormentors would ask him pityingly 'What's the matter, Chum – letting the life get you down?' while the hut parrot would never fail to comment soothingly: 'Ah, well, it's a grand life if you don't weaken!'

The best tactics against arguers was to butt in on their talk, flatly ignore the point, if any, of their argument, and introduce some irrelevant subject upon which the whole room felt deeply. The subject, for example, of toilet tins. This would cause heads to pop up everywhere, and would soon change a dull duel of words into a free-for-all debate in which everybody had the same chance of getting on other people's nerves.

These tins, perhaps, are an indelicate subject, but they were part of an indelicate life and must be explained. With the best will in the world, then, it was often impossible to reach the latrines at night, owing to the foul outdoor conditions of the camp. There were times when a man might put on clogs and, with Jerry searchlights trailing him, wade through mud and rain to regain his hut with nothing worse than a soaking, one clog sucked off his feet and mud all over his legs.

That last winter, however, it was not so simple. At night, the icy slopes leading to Nine Company latrine were practically unscalable without picks and tackle, especially during the frequent air raids, when the perimeter lights were switched off and the whole camp devoted to darkness through which peered suspicious Hun guards. Then, too, nocturnal blizzards were fierce and frequent, and for some of the spindle-legged, light-headed inhabitants of the huts an excursion from bed into such elements would have been an open invitation to collapse.

In short, then, a man made serious calls during daylight, and at night was obliged to rely upon a communal bucket if the hut boasted one, or a personal tin or tins if it didn't.

Now, no one who has not lived in a democracy of fourteen men intent on killing time can imagine the spate of suggestions, amendments and furious disputes that shook the hut before it was finally agreed that the tins were indispensable, that they should be kept just inside the porch at night, and that each man should be responsible for emptying his own the first thing every morning. Still less could an outsider imagine the suspicions, feuds and recriminations that soon developed over alleged breaches of these rules.

'Some lazy swine hasn't emptied his tin!' the day's orderly would announce bitterly. 'Perhaps he thinks I'm going to do it for him?'

'Wouldn't do you any harm if you did, Chum,' some trouble-seeker would put in, 'you're not too particular whose tin you get hold of at night and . . .'

Down would go the orderly's broom. 'Are you suggesting it was me used your filthy tin the other night? Let me tell you this, Chum. I *know* my own tin, and that's the one I use - but if you're too dopey to remember which is yours, there's no need to ask whose this is. Damned if I'll sweep up till you've emptied it!'

'Now, now, gentlemen!' a would-be pacifist would soothe, 'don't let's start all that off again. After all, anybody can make a mistake at night. It's not as though we had any lights. Why, I dare say I've used other people's myself before now, and . . .'

'Then you can bloody well empty this one!' the orderly and his late antagonist would announce together, while the rest of the room, pretending to be annoyed by the disturbance,

but secretly only too glad for something to be happening, would emerge from their blankets, forget their craving for breakfast, and wade into yet another toilet tin debate.

Yes, they led to endless waste of words, those tins; but they sometimes provided a bit of fun - as when a joker secretly filled them from a jug, leaving those 'in the know' to smother their chuckles as, all through the night, murderous breathings emanated from the porch; or as on the morning when the most irritable man in all captivity emptied, by mistake, the tin of his rival and was later obliged to make a further journey with his own, whereupon he . . .

But no! I will draw a veil over that episode and, indeed, will now quit the whole subject of hut squabbles with the reflection that we were not, on the whole, a cantankerous crew, but that no community of men, whether of soldiers, stockbrokers or Saints, could be snowed up together for months without sometimes loathing the sound of each other.

I say sound, rather than sight, because most of the time we wallowed in Stygian darkness, due partly to the broken windows being largely boarded up and partly to the Hun system of allowing no electric current before dusk - on the grounds of economy - and no electric current after dusk - on the grounds of air raids.

In happier days, we had improvised lamps out of shallow tins, pyjama cord wicks and *ersatz* margarine; but now the only emergency light in the hut was John Newby's nightlight, which worked, I think, on an allowance of boot dubbin, and was zealously guarded for special occasions such as the reading out of news bulletins.

For the greater part of our waking hours, therefore, we lay in the dark - sometimes listening in silence to the bombs bursting on Nuremberg and the near-based German planes circling overhead to avoid being destroyed on their own air fields, but more often just chatting in desultory fashion about camp news, past experiences, future hopes, and everything under the sun except women. Women (other than as cooks) had dropped from first place to last as a topic of conversation, while Pin-up girls had long since been ousted from day dreams by the nearer-the-heart subject of hot dinners.

Not that our minds were completely occupied with food. For all I know to the contrary, my

hutmates may have been secretly meditating upon the Universe, or drawing profound moral lessons from their sufferings; but certainly some, at least, of our feelings were on the physical plane, so that when an article in the newspaper 'Camp' asked the question 'What spiritual lessons has captivity taught you?' Alf Tuck's answer, 'Never to jib at anything to eat!' struck

us as a profound thought, beautifully expressed.

Alfred, besides being a smart bombardier, a versatile musician and an abominable cook, was the youngest man in the hut, and one to whom that winter was a real ordeal. Captured at St. Valerie when barely eighteen, he had stuck nearly five years' imprisonment – including a period of forced labour in the mines, during



Phoney Optimist.

which an accident had badly injured his hand and affected his nerves. His must-be-doing-something temperament now had no outlet, as hitherto, in running a dance band or concocting cakes, and although Bert Gilbert and I were thus spared nights of groaning agony trying to digest his recipes, we were much disturbed by the sharp decline in his health that winter.

For a time Alf bore up very well without parcels and, indeed, when Bert 'blacked out' one morning, so deeply and lengthily that we had to carry him to the M.I. room on a stretcher, Alf was one of the four bearers who managed the awkward, slithery journey down a miniature glazier without mishap.

But, whereas a day or two in the warmth of the M.I. room restored Bert to a state of health where he could rest on his bed as heartily as the best, Alfred, once started on the downward slope, slid rapidly into a mere ghost of his former self, his peaked features, saucer eyes and shaky voice being hardly recognizable to his friends. Unable to relax in bed, he felt the cold more and more keenly, yet it was farcical to try and make a fire with the handfuls of brown dust the Huns doled out as coal.

So it gave Alf, especially, a new lease of life when the hut decided to burn the last remaining under-floor boards together with most of the joists that supported the floor. By this expedient, we were able to keep up a real, honest-to-goodness blaze for a few days – a blaze sufficient to thaw the washing on the lines, melt the icicles on the roof beams, and make the room a lot more habitable.

During that brief spell of luxury, we borrowed a gramophone, invited visitors to the room and, in between records ranging from Bach to Duke Ellington, Alfred gave us tunes on his accordion, quite in his old style. It was a tonic, too, to all of us to sit up and talk to the visitors, one of whom, Jakey Ross, a popular camp boxer, had just done a stretch in the bunker for putting on a postcard his opinion of German rations – not, we gathered, a particularly favourable opinion.

One thing we chuckled over that evening was a truly brilliant feat on the part of occupants of the *escapees'* hut, who managed to decoy a Jerry sentry away from his post, then marched off with his sentry box, which they chopped up and stowed away for firewood long before the outraged Huns could set the snoops in motion.

This sort of thing was heart warming – and so, too, were the optimistic views we exchanged about parcels under the cheerful influence of the fire. Even though the railways were *kaput*, we told each other, we knew, through Mr. Berg, that the Red Cross were striving urgently to reach us, so we could just hang on cheerfully till a way was found. Besides, the rate the Russians were moving, the war would be over next week, and who cared about feeling peckish in the meantime?

But the war, alas, was not over next week – though our fireside evenings were – and the 'peckish' feeling was now giving way to something much more sinister: an awful *lightness* both of head and body . . . a feeling that the rations were mere ballast, without which a fellow would float calmly away during one of those ever more frequent dizzy spells.

However, to return to Alfred, very shortly after our successful 'At Home,' a place was somehow found for him in the desperately overcrowded hospital, and greatly though we missed him, we rejoiced to know that he would now get the attention he needed.

Another real Londoner to go 'in dock' was Pop Gilbey, ex-policeman, who at well over fifty had done the 'longest beat in my service' – the weary trek through France, Belgium and Holland to the prison camp in Germany. Never more would Pop's head poke through the door to warn us 'only two hundred and seventeen (or whatever it was) more shopping days to Xmas, gentlemen!'

With the possible exception of Frank Moore – who was now more than four stones under weight, and so thin that we used to warn him of cracks in the floor boards – the occupants of Hut Sixteen were no worse off than fellows in the hundreds of other huts in the Stalag. In fact, we were 'sitting pretty' in comparison with some, for we did at least have bunks to lie on, whereas in the big double-sized huts on the high, exposed 'Sports Field' newcomers from the camp at Moosburg were lying on straw on the ground, some of them having only one blanket to keep out the shrivelling cold.

But we derived little enough comfort from the thought that others were worse off than we were. Even when Jack Welch recalled the ghastly plight of the early Russian prisoners at Lamsdorf, it didn't help *us* much. We well

remembered how we had tossed cigarettes, chocolate and bars of soap from our parcels into the Russian compound, and how the poor fellows had stuffed everything alike into their mouths, chewing and swallowing frantically. And we remembered, too, how day after day they used to push their tumbrils of dead down to the lime pits, sometimes members of the burial party themselves dropping dead *en route*.

Well, the camp hadn't reached that stage yet, but it wasn't so far off it that men could feel complacent about things, and as the cold, dark days dragged interminably on, many Kriegies sunk into a kind of torpor, more dangerous than the state of ravenous restlessness that preceded it. Their apathy became such that not even the most dramatic war news could now rouse them.

Men who had exasperated the Germans by dismissing the disasters of France, Norway, Greece, Crete and Singapore as mere trifles, and who had cheerfully informed their guards that Adolf was being 'led up the garden' in Russia, would now admit that Runstedt's short-lived offensive had shaken them. That they no longer had faith in an early end to the war – and that they just couldn't work up interest, anyway.

The fact was, of course, that after the high hopes of the previous summer, the whole of this winter had been a bitter anti-climax to prisoners, many of whom feared that unless food reached them soon, they would falter at the last fence and return home undermined in health – invalids dependent on their families.

This fear was seldom put into words, for there was a horror of anything that savoured of self-pity, but it could often be detected from chance 'thinking aloud' and it naturally took a lot of joy out of the prospect of the war ending at last. Unhappily, too, this fear was often well founded.

On the less serious side, one bogey that haunted quite a few Kriegies till it was laid by laughter, was the notion that we should all be sterile, if not impotent, for many years to come, due, said the whisperers, to deficiencies in our diet.

However, so badly had the rhythm of most men's lives been upset that there was some excuse for those who swallowed this yarn, and I must hasten to add that the majority of men were far from imagining themselves to be more unfortunate than they actually were.

In fact, as the situation in the camp got

graver, so did most men show the stronger side of their characters. There seemed to be a greater realization that the 'other fellow' was also groggy, and more efforts were made to control nerves and preserve a little peace in the huts. There was a solid front shown to the Huns, and even the *realists* were determined not to fall for 'farm work.' In short, the spirit of the camp was sound.

And a sound spirit was needed now. Deaths had been mercifully few at Hohenfels (though there had been more that winter than in the rest of the two and a half years of the Stalag's existence), so it came as a shock to the camp when the first double funeral took place on March 13, and two of our comrades were left for ever in German soil.

All who felt able to do so lined the route of the funeral to pay tribute to the dead, and the Germans, as was their custom, provided military honours. Some men saw irony in this, though it is right to say that our comrades had not died *directly* from starvation: right to say, too, that some Germans seemed as conscious as us of the tragedy of these prisoners' deaths on the eve of liberation.

It was a sad, silent gathering that watched the cortège leave the Stalag, and when our own band, the Funeral March over, broke into the customary sprightly march for the return journey, it was still a silent crowd that dispersed to the huts.

Perhaps there were some who wondered whether they, too, might fail to last the journey; whether they, too, might never see their homes. And no doubt there were many who pondered the same questions: Could the Red Cross find a means to reach us? Could they get their help to us in time?

The Red Cross could – and did. On March 22, 1945, a car drew up at the Stalag gates. In it was Mr. Berg, his face all smiles. Behind him came two white motor wagons, the Red Cross marking on their sides. They had come to the camp from Moosburg. They were full to their roofs with parcels. And the parcels were meant for us – the first of a steady stream.

Thank you, Mr. Berg. Thank you, Red Cross. No need to tell you how we felt. We christened those wagons WHITE ANGELS – and that, I think, says it all.



White Angels in Sight

Parcels up!

THERE may be more important things in life than food. But not to a prisoner of war.

Where, but in a prison camp, would you find a fellow flogging his false teeth for a loaf of bread – and then borrowing them back to eat it? Where else would a man sleep with a loaf under his neck – only to find on waking that some other hungry soul had cut an end off?

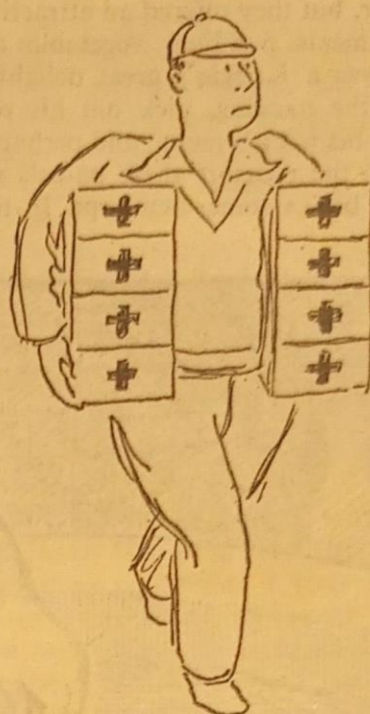
And where else would you meet a character like Simon ('Simon called Kite-hawk' they named him) who preyed on Lamsdorf in the hungry days. A big, simple sort of fellow, harmless save when he was ravenous, which was pretty often, 'Simon called Kite-hawk' would swoop silently on any food he spotted – and promptly scoff it.

Then he would hover, conscience-stricken, near the scene of his crime and wait for the anguished cry: 'Who's swiped my spuds?' upon which he would immediately admit with wide-eyed frankness: 'I did Mate . . . I've ate 'em . . . I was 'ungry . . . See?' and would hold out his jaw in retribution.

No matter whether he had robbed a little fellow, or the biggest tough in camp, 'Simon called Kite-hawk' would accept passively any hammering his victim cared to give him. But let anybody doubt his word if he had once declared his innocence, and he would fight with outraged fury to the end. A queer bird, Simon – and not unpopular.

There were queer birds, too, at Hohenfels, including a species who preyed on other people's cats, cooking and eating them, stewed like rabbits. These hungry hawks were much despised – partly because they ate cats which Ginger Darling and Bill Spink had, at some self-sacrifice, reared as pets, and partly because the idea came from Huns, who were wont to slaver over kitten boiled in milk.

But let that pass. Let the felines haunt their eaters, and let me turn from tales of hunger. For hunger, *real* hunger, was not our normal lot and it is with our normal lot that I shall hence-



forth deal, putting down briefly some facts about our food.

For nearly two years at Hohenfels, each and every Kriegie received a Red Cross parcel weekly, and these precious parcels were the blessing of our lives.

There was ten pounds weight of goodness in each parcel. Planned to supplement the German rations, they took account of more than need for vitamins. They contained little luxuries and the element of surprise. They might have been packed by some wise and kindly mother – for who else would pop bulls-eyes amongst the solid foodstuffs, or think of sending pancake mixture to prisoners of war?

Most of the parcels came from either England or Canada and both kinds were excellent; the ideal being to have a different sort on alternate weeks. The Canadian parcels were standard in contents and contained the following: a tin each of bully-beef, meat roll, salmon and sardines; a large packet of biscuits, quarter of a pound of cheese, a five ounce slab of chocolate, a pound of jam or marmalade, a packet of prunes, a packet of raisins, half a pound of coffee or a quarter of tea, four ounces of sugar, a pound tin each of butter and of powdered milk, some salt and pepper mixed and a small bar of soap.

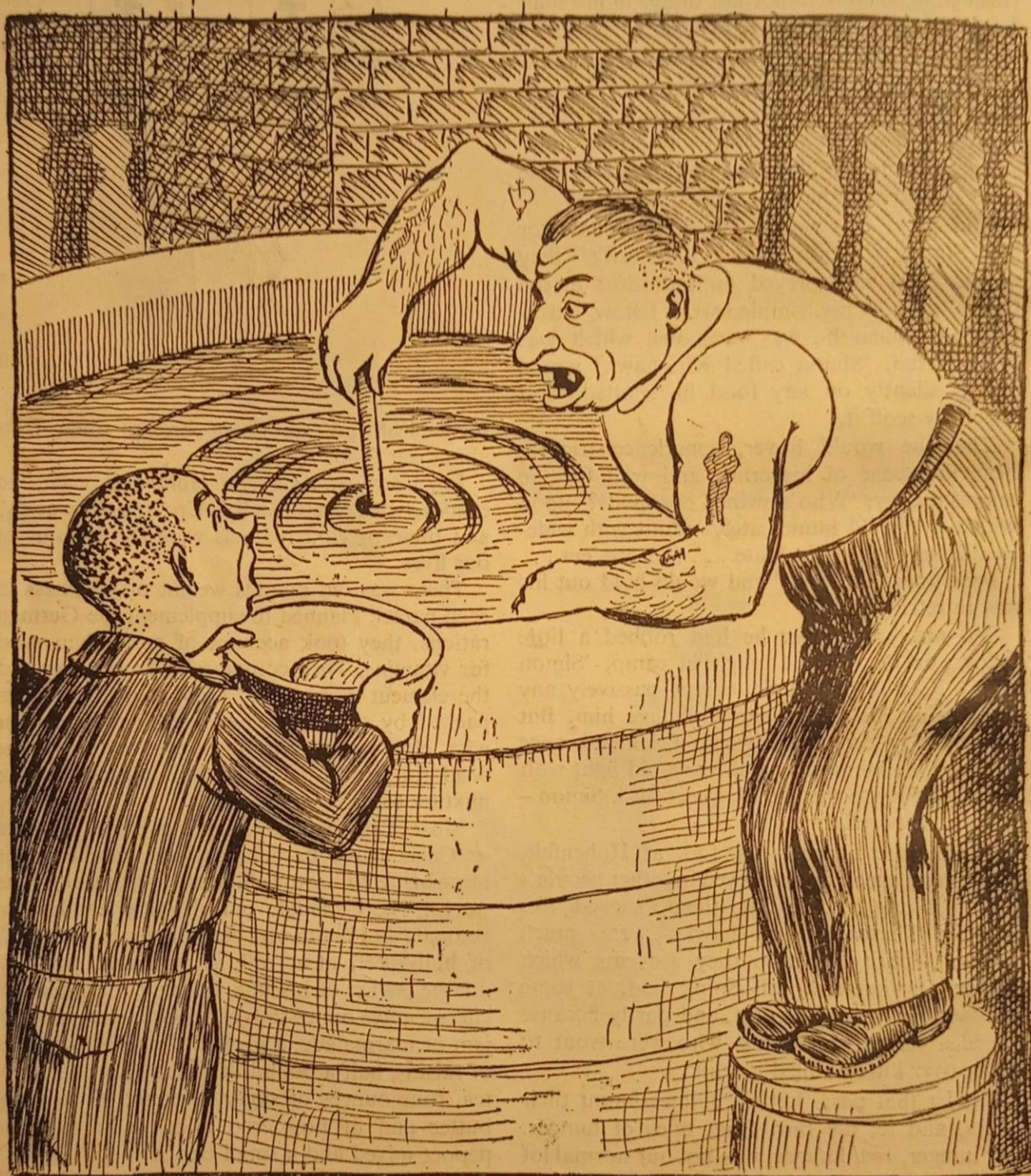
The English parcels were less lavish in milk

and butter, but they offered an attractive variety of tinned meats, puddings, vegetables and what-nots. It was a Kriegie's great delight to delve amongst the packing, pick out his prizes and decide on his week's menu, and perhaps the best pointer to the pleasure these parcels gave were the scrap books some men kept. In them were

pasted labels and carton fronts, all different, from tins and packets collected in the course of years.

To turn from the sublime to the ridiculous, German rations also figured in our diet, the bread and potatoes, at least, being vital.

In theory, indeed, the Germans took no



cognizance of Red Cross food and under the Geneva Convention were supposed to feed us on the same standard as their own home-based troops. In practice, of course, they did nothing of the kind, and at no camp in my experience did they serve any sort of 'knife and fork meal' at any period of the day. Soup, and soup only – and that but once a day – was the nearest to a dinner they provided and the type of soup it often was can be gathered from our general term for it – 'Oh, Sweet Mystery of Life.'

Specific brands of this liquid included 'Sauerkraut Soup' (highly laxative and vilely vinegary), 'Celluloid Soup' (named from its flavour but made from dried vegetables since genuine celluloid was scarce), 'Mock Mangelwurzel' (square, fibrous chunks of cattle food, fortunately tasteless), 'Fish Soup' (made from stinking fish-heads), and 'Caterpillar Soup' (in which cabbage or something was mixed with the worms).

These last three delicacies were specialties at Lamsdorf, where the element of surprise, so delightful in Red Cross parcels, was seldom lacking in the soup. Apart from the Tuesday in September '41, when I found a morsel of meat in my bowl, the most startling novelty I recall was the 'Fruit, fish and nut soup' we got one day. Apparently the Turkish Red Cross had sent some bulk raisins, nuts and preserves for distribution to prisoners and what the Huns couldn't eat themselves they had just bunged into the soup, along with the decayed fish-heads.

What with fish bones, raisin pips, prune stones and nut shells to contend with, it was a pretty exotic dish and a Yorkshireman spoke for us all when he demanded: 'Who do the bastards think I am – Chu Chin Chow?'

But to return to Hohenfels, where conditions enabled us to control the cookhouses ourselves, the soup was always as good as could be made from Hun ingredients and sometimes just good, without qualifications. The best stuff served was known as 'Commission Soup' or 'General Soup,' because the Jerry quartermaster had a habit of issuing more and better ingredients when a visiting 'Protecting Power Commission' or a German Inspecting General was expected. Matching this craftiness, our own cookhouse chiefs accepted the extra ingredients with thanks – and used them the day after the visitors had gone.

Soups I can recall without nausea include those made from peas, barley and birdseed (millet) respectively (the barley being best used with powdered milk from Canadian parcels), but I don't want any more Celluloid or Sauerkraut and no ex-Kriegie will complain if swedes are put on points.

Cooked in huge, attractively burnished boilers, the soup was drawn for each respective hut by its day's orderly armed with an ordinary metal washing bowl. In normal times, the hungrier types could usually 'double up' for a second helping, but in the thin days every mugful was watched and hundreds of Oliver Twists asked for more in vain.

It was no joke being the day's 'stooge' and having to draw the soup for fourteen men. Those underfoot conditions I have mentioned before were particularly foul near the main cookhouse and it was no uncommon sight to see an orderly, both hands holding the bowl, firmly stuck in the mud from which he could only extricate himself by stepping out of his clogs.

Just as curse-compelling was the glass-like surface of the roads in winter; and to walk up the glacier leading to Nine Company huts carrying a brimming bowl of soup is an experience I now repeat in nightmares. Seldom have I seen such heart-rending dismay on a man's face as when, at the height of the famine, a soup-



carrying stooge slipped over, spreading his hutmates' meal down the icy slopes. His dumb distress forbade laughter and evoked sympathy. One neutral observer offered to break the news gently to the stooge's hutmates, while two others of us accompanied him back to the cook-house to explain the tragedy.

Eventually, they were able to spare him some more and he departed, carrying the bowl as though it held uranium, though actually it was only a swede and birdseed soup that would have caused riots had they served it up at Dartmoor.

But so would most of the German rations, especially such delicacies as 'Stink Cheese,' which had to be kept on the roof outside the huts, or German jam, made from bad fruit, turnips and saccharine.

These 'dry rations,' however, were so minute in quantity that the quality didn't matter much. In Red Cross parcel days we hardly noticed them, while in non-parcel times we were glad to swallow homœopathic doses of anything that would keep our gastric juices working. Most innocuous of the regular German issues was a soggy white mess ironically termed 'cream cheese.' This insipid stuff may once have been derived from milk, but all its flavour and nourishment had long since been removed by a process known only to German scientists.

Easily the best of the Jerry *ersatz* foods was the margarine (made from coal extract and flowers) which was not unpleasant in flavour, though I cannot speak for its value as food. Of German cheese, jam or honey we got only a few grammes once per week, but the margarine ration was issued in small pats daily and was a useful standby since we could fry and bake with it, and so preserve our English margarine for spreads. When there was a good run of the butter-laden Canadian parcels, we were so well off for fats that we could make lamps or grease Alf's gramophone motor with the *ersatz* margarine, but on the whole there wasn't much we wasted.

Wehrmacht bread, of which, in good times, we received a fifth of a rye loaf (about 300 grammes) daily, was wholesome stuff, but could not be eaten by the many prisoners who had developed stomach trouble; these received instead a white roll daily. By racketeering with the Jerries a man could get extra bread and potatoes for cigarettes (which were issued with the parcels at the rate

of fifty per week), so that, provided always that parcels were coming through, there was no need for a man to go short of bulk and the only hunger was for fresh meat, vegetables and fruit.

Minute but precious issues of lettuce, marrow and onions were made from the small camp allotments and never before, we told each other, had we really *tasted* these commonplace delicacies. But hunger and novelty make good sauces, and thus it was that hedgehog (cooked in clay) was voted 'tops' by a hut that caught some, while rabbits were consumed with zest by Aussies who had hitherto despised them as vermin.

Rabbits, for a time, were a great feature at Hohenfels and scores of huts had the most elaborate hutches and runs full of them. Chief credit for this must go to an enterprising gent named Boswick, whose stud farm for rabbits became a menace to the crops of Bavaria. Apparently, one or two Kriegies had either caught or racketeered doe rabbits and were keeping them as pets. Then came Mr. Boswick, with a couple of buck rabbits and a bright idea. The following advertisement appeared on walls and notice boards: -

BOSWICK'S BUCKS DOES YOUR DOE WANT DOING?

Stud Fee - One Fag

RESULTS GUARANTEED

So nobly did the bucks respond to good treatment, Red Cross oatmeal and public admiration of their efforts, that the 'guaranteed results' were soon nibbling contentedly all over the Stalag. Rival studs such as 'Hutchinson's Hutch-fillers' and 'Sutton's Surefires' also worked overtime and all the carpenters in the camp got busy, making hutches out of Red Cross packing cases and hammered-out tins. Perhaps, too, rabbits outside the camp heard of the superior living conditions inside and slipped through the wire to give themselves up; but whatever the reason, the whole place was eventually teeming with brown, black, white and piebald rabbits, who waxed and grew fat on anything from Bemax to Sauerkraut soup, no sacrifice being too great to keep them happy. Easily the biggest, fattest and smuggest rabbit in Germany was 'Old Bill' of Ten Company, who could be viewed for a fag a time and who looked like a kangaroo with dropsy. But though Bill could eat up the Hut's garden produce,

have first dip at their Red Cross parcels, and make himself at home in the room if he wished, he no doubt ended up in the stew pot, like lesser rabbits, in the 'week of the long knives.'

This week of 'blood and tears' was the inevitable outcome of a Hun order that, owing to this and that, all live-stock in the camp must be destroyed by a certain date or they would be confiscated and/or killed. There was evidence that this order was serious, so, rather than let their rabbits fall into the hands of the enemy, the Kriegies mournfully put some through the wire to feed on German farmers, and, not so mournfully that it spoilt their appetites, cooked and ate the others.

There must have been some full bellies that week amongst the chief rabbit fanciers, because there had been so many rabbits in the Stalag that the Germans once *ordered a census* to be taken of them. I won't say how many thousands were counted, because no one would believe anything that I wrote afterwards, but it was a hell of a lot of rabbits anyway, and they left behind them some very pleasant memories and a lot of fur and skins for glove and slipper makers.

Which reminds me that part of the reason for the Huns' grudge against rabbit fanciers was that the Kriegies had been ordered to hand over to the Third Reich the skins of any rabbits they killed; whereas, suspecting perhaps that they were contributing towards a fur coat for Frau Goering, they donated only half a dozen scurvy skins in eighteen months – and that with very bad grace.

The Huns considered this a clear case of 'holding out' on them and they were also suspicious that the hutches built to house the rabbits were hiding other things too, as, indeed, they often were: for we well knew that 'Moto' and his snoops were not nature lovers who enjoyed probing amongst straw and rabbit droppings, so when we had anything to hide, which was nearly always, we made full use of the bunnies' private quarters.

Yet another cause of friction over rabbits was the determination of the fanciers to get all the fresh grass they could for them. Now, the Stalag grounds were soon nibbled bare of verdure, except for one strictly *verboten* area – the 'No Man's Land' between the barbed wire double fences and the 'warning wire.'

So, despite the plainly worded wooden notices threaded on the wire, rabbit owners would risk a shot from the watch towers by bending under the single strand and plucking the long grass from the untrodden corridor.

One lad was so convinced that it was okay to put his arm under the wire, providing his body didn't follow it, that he ignored the shouts of a Hun guard just outside the stockade and continued to pluck a supper for his rabbits. The Hun thereupon raised his rifle and shot him, the bullet mercifully missing a vital spot, though wounding him badly. However, the Kriegie, who was very philosophic about the incident, made a good recovery; the Kommandant issued a further warning against infringing the warning wire, but sounded a regretful note about the shooting; and most of the camp, though maintaining that a *human being* would have fired a warning shot first, admitted that the Hun had probably acted within his rights under the Hun regulations – and was only an animal, anyway, so knew no better.

Certainly, the rabbits went on multiplying for some time after that incident and certainly, too, grass from 'No Man's Land' was still included in their diet, but in the view of some



N°3 COOKHOUSE



fanciers, the Kommandant always looked with a jaundiced eye upon them from that day on, and the 'week of the long knives' was already casting its grisly shadow.

But all this talk about rabbits is not to give the impression that they figured very much on the average Kriegie's menu; for they didn't – and some huts, Hut Sixteen, for instance, never even tasted one. True, our next door neighbours, who had several hutches, were a bit sceptical about that; but how could we help it if the midnight rabbit rustlers who raided their stock chose to skin the rabbits on the spot – and leave the incriminating evidence outside our window?

No, the menu of most of us was made up of the Red Cross parcels and the German rations, plus a certain amount of racketeered bread and spuds, and it was only the Big Shot gamblers, racketeers and shop owners, who were able to vary their diet very much. Some of these Big Shots liked to dine on lamb and duck occasionally and they reckoned, anyway, on eating three good meals a day, so if you, 'Talkie,' or you, 'Topper,' or you, 'Nobby,' are still at large and have learned to read, don't think I'm referring to you in the following paragraphs. I'm not: I'm confining myself to the eating habits of the normal Kriegie, in the normal Hohenfels hut, in the average days of parcels.

To begin with, we formed into syndicates. A syndicate might consist of the whole hut – in which case they would pool all food in common and appoint a cook and quartermaster – or it might consist of two or three kindred spirits who took turns at chef and bottlewasher. But even when the 'syndicate' comprised one man only, the meal routine would be pretty much the same.

In place of reveille would sound the early morning cookhouse call, which meant that hot water was available for tea. Usually, the day's orderly would draw this for the whole room and unless there were some very determined 'lone wolves' in the hut, the big metal jug would be ready primed with tea from one and all.

Ranged on the table would be an odd assortment of tins and mugs, already set with milk and sweetening, and the orderly would fill them and hand them up to their owners, still ensconced in bed. Red Cross parcels would be reached down from shelves and the average man's breakfast would begin.

Except, perhaps on Sundays, when we liked to spread ourselves a bit, breakfast seldom consisted of more than a slice of bread and jam; but after roll-call, which might take anything from ten minutes to three hours, a mid-morning brew-up would be accompanied by a biscuit. Then would come soup at twelve o'clock, to be followed by bread and a spread of something and another brew of tea, the cookhouse supplying hot water. For supper at eight o'clock, cocoa was favourite, with a piece of bread and cheese if possible; but, in the meantime, would have come the real blow-out of the day – the Stalag Pie at tea-time.

Into this mighty meal, the Kriegie put his heart. Everything he could spare from his Red Cross parcel, everything he could racketeer from the Huns, would be set aside each day and provided the pie turned out all right, he hadn't lived in vain.

Potato was the basis of the pie – and sometimes, alas, it was potato bust. But not often. There were three or four tins of meat or fish in the average parcel, so proper handling would ensure that half a tin each day was reserved for the pie. And whether the tin held meat roll, salmon, stew or bacon, the recipe for making was the same.

Draw an issue of cooked-in-their-skins spuds from the cookhouse. Peel them, if you're fussy, and then mash. Take half a tin of something and chop or slice artistically. With some Jerry margarine, grease an open tin or dish. Pack spuds and filling in alternate layers, put some blobs of marge on top – and there's your pie!

To cook same, stick a tin disk with number on it in pie, and take to cookhouse, where trained chefs will insert in oven. Pie should be cooked an artistic brown and eaten hot – but won't be, if chefs are badgered about it.

Well, that was the Stalag pie in its simplest, one-man style; but, delicious though it was, it could not be compared with the sumptuous specimens prepared by the bigger hut syndicates. A keen quartermaster could ensure that each day's pie had several ingredients – and the more ambitious efforts made the Jerries gape and sniff.

'Wonderbar . . . wonderbar!' gasped a visiting Hun General to his staff. He was gazing at an Aussie hut's pie, displayed in a huge tin dish. Just a couple of stuffed marrows, with bacon, sausages, peas, spam and carrots. But it looked

so good. The potatoes in which the whole was enthroned were so tastefully patterned and browned, and the design of the Aussie badge so cunningly worked in peas, that a General could not fail to be impressed.

Impressive, too, were the massive cakes, sometimes on display in the cookhouse. Made from racketeered flour or from crushed biscuits and often rich with raisins, they sometimes carried icing (made from powdered milk) and nuts, derived from prune stones. They were at their most dazzling when made by professional bakers in the camp for the big club 'do's,' which were features of our life in parcel days.

As an example of what could be accomplished by judicious hoarding from parcels or by buying on the marts, here is the menu of the 'Cricket Dinner' of 1943, the catering arrangements for which were in the hands of Carl Menti, of Romano's. Carl was voted to have done full justice, both to the famous restaurant and to cricket, but since they omitted to invite me, which wasn't cricket, I shall only remark that the number of courses would have been illegal in post-war Britain.

<i>Menu</i>	<i>Toasts</i>
Thick Vegetable Soup	The King
—	—
Salmon Cutlets	Cricket
Tomato Sauce	—
—	The Guests
Lancashire Hot Pot	—
Peas Carrots	<i>Business</i>
—	Presentation of trophies
Apple Pudding	for 1943 season
Sauce	—
—	<i>Entertainment</i>
Cheese and Biscuits	Songs by Trevor Hill
—	Jack Harris in "Mo"
Coffee	Our Cricketing
	Forefathers

But to return from the banqueting hall (K.2) to our humble huts, I must say a few words about cooking; for it wasn't always that we entrusted our Stalag Pie to the cookhouse and there were meals like porridge, dried egg, pancake or fry-ups, that couldn't be done in communal ovens. Also, half the fun of 'mucking in' with one or two others was to see who could

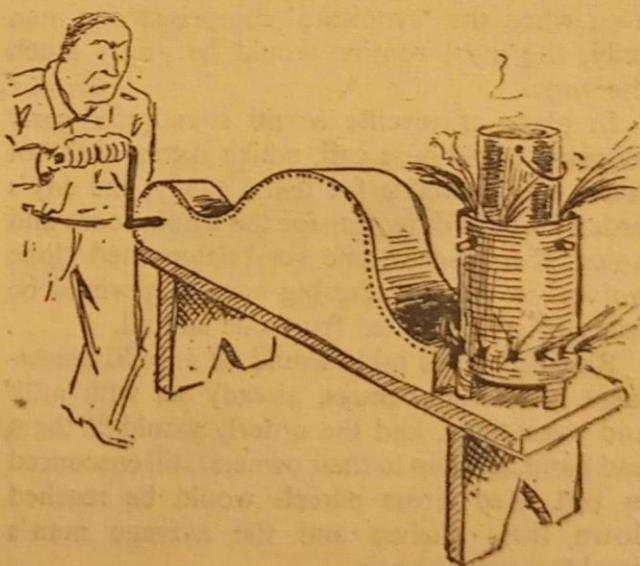
do the least damage to the food, while sometimes our home-cooked efforts were eminently eatable.

Cooking appliances were simple. They included the smokeless heaters I have already mentioned, which could run on cardboard, paper or wood chips (according to the *Voelkische Beobachter*, these were the model for save-fuel German civilian stoves) and the famous 'blower fires,' which burnt the otherwise unburnable German coal dust. These gadgets, if worked properly, would boil a dixie of water in no time. They worked on the principle of a forge, a fan worked by a wooden wheel and bootlace pulley, directing a concentrated draught under a brazier. Prisoners from Italy were said to have been the first to introduce them to the Stalags.

Another domestic appliance, useful for making brew-ups, was an 'immersion heater' run off the electric light. These gadgets were extremely unpopular with the Huns, for not only were they continually fusing the whole Stalag lighting system, but when handled they were, as I knew to my cost, as dangerous as the chair in Sing-Sing prison.

Hut ovens varied from big, gleaming affairs, made from scores of flattened and highly polished tins and fitted with trays and gadgets galore, to huge contraptions of clay which we used to build round the Jerry stoves in the early days.

Alf Tuck once erected in Hut Sixteen a clay oven which looked like an Esquimaux igloo



and was big enough to live in, though we soon discovered that the rest of the room wasn't. I remember Bill Welch putting a bowl of stew inside this oven and later complaining that, though there was plenty of meat in the stew, it was pretty tasteless stuff. And I remember, too, the expression on his face when he discovered he was chewing lumps of clay from the oven ceiling.

But we didn't keep that oven very long and all I can recall about the iron one that followed it was that it took five or six hours of swearing and stoking before it was warm enough to melt margarine. At that time, Arthur Dallimore, the Aussie artist, and I had the misfortune to be mucking in together, and we could hardly get up early enough in the morning to get a meat roll warmed by teatime.

One day Dal offered to cook the meat if I would fry the spuds and since 'cooking the meat' consisted of warming up a tin of Argentine stew, I thought I could trust him with this, while I did the more technical job of frying. Dal put the tin in the flat over, while I put the frying pan on top, and at hourly intervals throughout the day he asked me when the spuds were going to be warm enough to eat, since the tin already felt hot after the first four hours in the oven.

Just before 'Lights out,' Reg. Witham warned

me that the spuds were being 'burnt to a cinder,' which meant that they were slightly brown on one side, so I told Dal to open the tin of stew and we would get cracking on our tea.

There's nothing more to tell except this: Dal's tin of stew turned out to be a tin of syrup and, in trying to show him how to read a label, I knocked the pan of spuds on the floor. But the moral we both drew from it all was this: it's no good relying on a trance-bound partner.

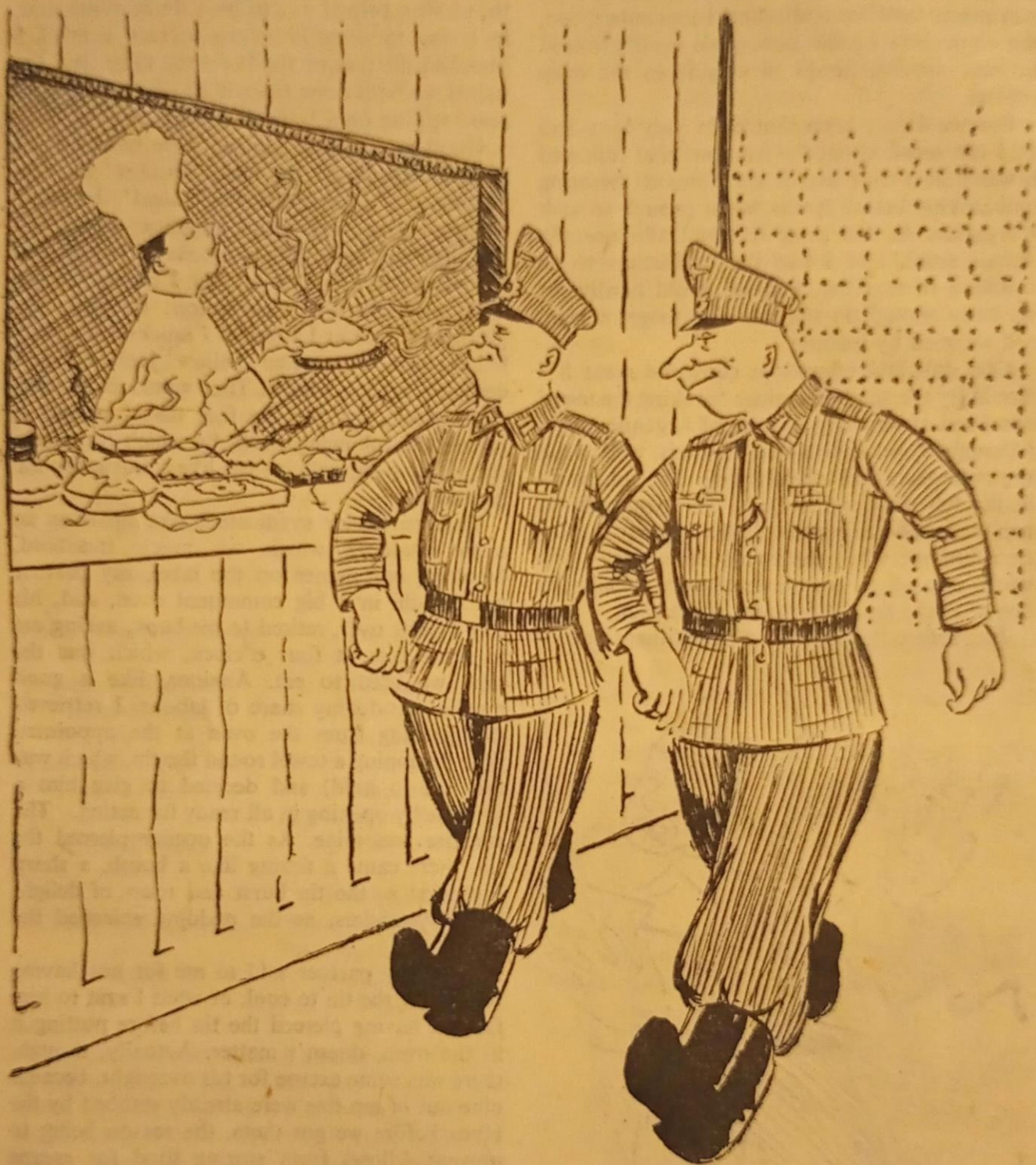
Good partners, of course, were hard to find and the search for the ideal 'mucker' was unceasing at Hohenfels—the 'ideal' being a fellow with a very small appetite, who loved washing up and didn't smoke. Despite the abundance of eccentrics at 383, I never met one who answered this description; but for one glorious period at Lamsdorf I mucked in with a fellow who contracted yellow jaundice and couldn't eat his whack. That would have been clear profit, but for the fact that I caught it myself the following week, by which time he'd recovered sufficiently to eat like a horse for the pair of us.

That particular syndicate broke up over an apple pudding which we much treasured. Marking our names on the label, my partner put the tin in a big communal oven, and, his day's work over, retired to his bunk, asking me to wake him at four o'clock, which was the time we used to eat. Anxious, like a good mucker, to do my share of labour, I retrieved the pudding from the oven at the appointed time (wrapping a towel round the tin, which was too hot to hold) and decided to give him a surprise by opening it, all ready for eating. The surprise was mine. As the opener pierced the tin, there came a fizzing like a bomb, a sharp explosion as the tin burst and roars of delight from bystanders, as the pudding splashed the ceiling.

What my partner said to me for not having waited for the tin to cool, or what I said to him for not having pierced the tin before putting it in the oven, doesn't matter. Actually, though, there was some excuse for his oversight, because nine out of ten tins were already stabbed by the Huns before we got them, the reason being to prevent fellows from storing food for escape purposes.

The same tin-stabbing tactics were supposed to be employed at all Stalags, but at Hohenfels we





generally succeeded in drawing our parcels intact, the string around them still unbroken. Generally, but not always. For, just about the time of the last 1944 delivery of parcels, the Kommandant, acting under pressure from Higher-ups, decreed that all tins in the possession of prisoners must be pierced immediately and that tins not so pierced would be confiscated if found.

Consternation in the camp! What about those tins of salmon and meat that we had so sagely put by for a rainy day? Were we to scoff the food at once or were we to stab the tins now and get ptomaine poisoning when we eventually did eat the contents? Were the squareheads bluffing or was it true that big squads of them were standing by to search the huts? To hell with them, anyway, said we all. Next to our lives, those tins were our most treasured possessions and we'd neither stab them nor give them up, without some sort of struggle.

Well, the squareheads weren't bluffing. One misty evening they were seen to be advancing, in some force, on Nine Company huts, armed with sacks to hold the unpierced tins. The word passed swiftly through the company - and then the fun began.

Stabbing stuff that didn't matter - tins of margarine, for instance, that would keep for weeks - we played 'hide and seek' with the rest; the rest being every form of tinned meat, fish and vegetable that the parcels ever held.

And the snoops were out to find them if they could. 'Palliasses are no good... they're ripping 'em up,' a head announced, popping through the door. 'Stove-pipes are out, too... they're pulling 'em down wholesale!' another spy informed us, so, since the huts were seen to be too 'hot,' some fellows started bunging tins in packs and kitbags and dropping them through the back windows, where accomplices collected them. The tins were then hidden in gaps between the rooms until fresh places could be thought of.

Alf, Bert and myself were not overburdened with stock, but we didn't want to lose what tins we had, so we loaded up a small mail-bag of mine, which I was charged to take to safety somewhere else. On my way I passed shadowy figures, laden like Father Xmas with huge sacks. They were dodging in and out of huts and alleys as the Huns passed by, guttural shouts proving

that they weren't all undetected. Here and there were figures digging like stealthy murderers in the garden plots, while a latrine I took shelter in was full of non-customers resting their well-filled sacks.

Five Company seemed pretty free from Huns and there I dumped my bag with a friend, Alan Burford, the Stalag magician. In Alan's hut they fed communally and fed well, but they saved some tins from every single parcel and all these tins - scores of them in all - were normally packed in a false bottomed table, the top of which slid back. Normally, I said, but not to-night. While the search bug bit the Jerries there was no sense in taking risks, so all their tins were safely 'somewhere else' and presumably mine joined them, for they were given back intact as soon as the heat switched off Nine Company.

Not everybody was as lucky as that and one hut in Nine Company, Hut 28, was raided and deprived of over sixty tins by triumphant snoops. An amusing sidelight on this Jerry coup was that two members of the hut, Gilbert Horrabain and John Moore, the Aussie radio announcer, were playing together in the Offidium production of Patrick Hamilton's play 'Rope.' Gilbert was given the grim news about the grub by some tactful soul in the wings, and never, he told me later, did he play the part of the murderer with such conviction.

However, there was a happy ending to this raid, for just as the grinning snoops were about to cart the stuff out of the Lager, where they would no doubt have had the feed of their sordid lives, that grand fellow in an emergency, David MacKenzie, the camp leader, barred their way.

'No you bloody well don't!' said MacKenzie, or words to that effect, and he made the snoops, who, quite rightly, had much respect for him, dump their swag in his office and fetch the Kommandant.

The outcome of their heart to heart talk was that the food was returned to Hut 28 and new arrangements were made about unpunctured tins. They were to be kept in a special store and their Kriegie owners could draw them as they liked, on application, which was fair enough.

And, apart from our Red Cross parcels, fairness was all we asked.

Business as Usual

UNDER the Nazi terror, it was forbidden for prisoners to shoot their guards, and to assist the enforcement of this ban, the mere possession of firearms by a P.O.W. was frowned upon. In fact, both he and his supplier were liable to be shot.

Nevertheless, if a fellow still felt safer with a Luger and ammunition, he could get both at Stalag 383. It was just a matter of raising the cash—about 500 cigarettes for a Luger—and making contact with one of the racketeers well in with his Hun counterparts.

In the same way, he could buy himself a radio, camera, compass, or any other article *streng verboten* to prisoners, while if he wanted something reasonable, like an armchair, a packet of French postcards, a live duck, or an oil painting of his wife, he could deal openly on one of the properly established marts in the camp.

For Hohenfels—though a non-working camp—was a pretty seething centre of activities, ranging through honest labour, professional services and big capitalism to doubtful dealings and plain robbery. All this initiative, popularly lumped together under the general terms 'rackets,' found its focal point in the marts, of which there were forty or fifty in the camp in thriving times.

Sometimes a mart might consist of 'shop premises' in the corner of a hut, the customers being served through the window after reading the prices on a chalked board outside. More often, though, they took the form of market stalls on which the goods were openly displayed to the world.

Since tables and forms were hard to come by, the mart owner often had to remove the front door from his hut, and mount it on Red Cross packing cases to serve as his stand, and this door-lifting business naturally called for delicate negotiations with his hutmates, to say nothing of frequent hand-outs from takings.

However, granted the stand, a pitch not far from home, and some trading name such as



'The London Mart' (Service with a Smile) or 'Lemmy's Mart' (Lemme sell you something) the next step was to dress the stall with any odds and ends he could muster from his own and his pals' clothing parcels, put a couple of Red Cross food tins amongst the socks and shirts, and exhibit a notice that he was willing to buy, sell or exchange any form of goods with the maximum of courtesy and fairness.

From this humble start he might develop a business with strange ramifications, bringing him not only all the food and smokes he wanted, but many little luxuries, including a credit balance in a Blighty bank. On the other hand, he might develop only corns and pneumonia from standing about all day in all sorts of weather. Nor was it just a matter of luck. It was a question of business acumen, too, in a highly competitive market.

Mick Moore, a Lancashire bus driver, whose 'emporium,' the oldest established and best known in the camp, made him a Stalag millionaire, able to bestow Nuffield-like gifts on camp good causes, made his pile by initiative and energy which would have brought their reward anywhere.

You could buy anything at Mick's mart, from a mandoline to a mouse-trap, from a buck rabbit to a wrist watch, and whether he was filling your lighter for a cig a time, swapping

you a record of Gigli for a tin of sausages, disposing of your pants on commission, or arranging to buy you German civvy bread for your party, he carried out the transaction in a business-like manner.

He once paid me twenty-five fags for a pair of braces I only asked fifteen for, and in support of other good causes he was time after time the highest bidder for theatre and boxing programmes auctioned from the stage in aid of camp funds.

In short, Mick fulfilled graciously a real community need, and the projector operator at the 'National Theatre' could flash his mart advertisement on the screen during intervals, without fear of causing a riot.

But some camp capitalists were not so popular. In fact, the fiercest feeling against trading of any kind existed in some quarters of the Stalag, the main cause being the men's experience in other camps, where the term

'rackets' had implications far more sinister than at Hohenfels.

For not all our enemies wore the field grey uniform of the *Wehrmacht*. There were camps so rotten with racketeers in khaki, so controlled by rats who fattened on their own comrades, that in the dark days when a man's health, and even his life, hung in the balance, he could only ensure his full share of what meagre food the Huns issued by bribing fellow prisoners who'd toadied their way into certain jobs.

In these camps, there were hangers on of the cookhouses, ration stores, administrative jobs, &c., who had fat bellies, good accommodation, friendly treatment from Huns – and little hoards of watches, rings, cigarette cases and money, all received as 'gifts' from comrades who also wished to live.

Yes, the word 'rackets' in some Stalags stood for an octopus of greed and ruthlessness, with tentacles in strange places. It is to the high credit





of MacKenzie, and other administrators at 383, that no such monster preyed on us.

Even suspicious souls – and, God, how they breed in prison camps! – were fairly certain they got their rights at Hohenfels.

True, they'd pound your ear with tales of cookhouse helpers standing steak suppers to their pals, and so forth, but they'd have to

admit that these rather human lapses were quickly jumped upon and that, on the whole, we were quite remarkably free from the more vicious type of rackets. If a man thought otherwise, he had every encouragement to state his case.

But to return to our marts – what colour they splashed on the drab camp scene; what interest

they lent to the caged-in years! On one of the rare fine days when all the stalls were out, a man might spend a morning window-shopping – just walking from store to store seeing what money could buy in any camp currency from Woodbines to Rowntrees.

It was useful to know what 'Topper Brown' was asking for pancake mixture, what 'Mick Moore' was paying for Nestles, and whether socks and sardines were still an even swap.

Here's 'Smudger Smith's Store' with its stock of Red Cross tins, its books and clothes and records – and its special line in showcards, 'Politeness, Civility and Courtesy Our Watchwords. Please Ask for what You Want,' and though all you want from Smudger is to know how he distinguishes between his various worthy 'Watchwords,' at least you must respect the high class tone he sets.

Farther up the road, a Cypriot stall has onions for sale at five cigs for eight; a very nice line in rabbit fur bedroom slippers; and a small bust of Voltaire (or is it Dan Leno?) for a bar of Canadian chocolate.

The Aussie mart wants outsize pyjamas (which reminds you of 'Shorty' and his Aunt Agatha's clothing parcel. Don't forget to tip him the wink) and will sell a set of 'two-up dice' for one hundred cigarettes, 'not two-up cigarettes, please.'

The 'London Mart,' whose official price list is nicely situated in Nine Company latrine, requests gentlemen not to alter the chalked up prices 'thereby wasting time of one and all,' and 'Syd's Cash Stores' have also had some trouble, since they beg their many clients not to put 'roll-ups' made from butt ends in genuine cigarette packets as this practice 'creates a very bad impression.'

All round the 'Main Square' are dotted different stalls, and most of them have something odd to show. A really gorgeous blanket, knitted from vari-coloured socks, adorns the corner mart, which also accepts commissions for 'an exact likeness of your loved one by an accomplished artist.'

Judging from the specimens displayed, the 'accomplished artist' uses the square-up method of enlarging from photographs, and is a trifle out in his measurements, but who cares, anyway? For a few more cigarettes, the 'loved one' could be painted in oils by a Spanish painter, and the portrait set in a hand carved frame.

There are stalls which specialize in books, and from whose shelves you can buy Marx's 'Das Kapital' for only fifteen more cigs than you pay for Hitler's 'Mein Kampf,' but don't ask me what Karl Marx is doing in the heart of Nazi-land, for if it would take a volume to list the goods on the marts, it would take a library to explain how some of them got there.

There are stalls that take in washing, hire out gramophones, act as pawnshops, or 'undertake special commissions,' which latter service might mean anything from procuring you a radio to selling you cigarettes at £150 per thousand, payment to be made through army paymasters.

Other establishments have chalked-up notices that 'Uncle Ned will be in tonight' or that 'Fresh hen fruits will be on sale tomorrow' and if you are curious to know how the stallholders get hold of the precious bread and eggs perhaps



say, but whatever the price was in Stalag currency our biggest racketeers would have little difficulty in raising it. They had their fingers in many rich pies, from bookmaking to distilling, and they pulled out some very choice plums.

Not only were they supplying private customers and retailers on the marts with goods they got from Jerry; not only were they supplying Stalag clubs with all their catering requirements for a big 'do'; but they were also called on now and then to do the bargaining for semi-official organizations such as the theatres, sports clubs and 'escapes committee.' They did these jobs efficiently, and reaped their due reward.

One 'big shot' business man was Lawrence 'Talkie' Turkington — bookie, showman, auctioneer and live wire generally, whose quick wits, cheeky grin, loud voice and 'drive' were known throughout the camp. Though not without his critics, 'Talkie' was something more than a mere featherer of his own nest. He was a 'fixer-upper' of genius who, in the pioneer days at Hohenfels, could be trusted to produce from nowhere such things as the complete planking for a theatre stage, a couple of windows for the library, or twenty-seven electric light bulbs for the Stalag school.

For the first Boxing Day celebrations at 383, 'Talkie' organized a 'Coney Island Amusements Hall' with all kinds of fair-ground booths, competitions, sideshows and other attractions, including bands in attendance, and this was only one example of enterprise which raised very useful sums for the Stalag Welfare Fund. His reward was to become 'Caretaker' of the barn-like building called 'Coney Island,' and there he built himself a cosy little sanctum from which to conduct operations. Operations, often useful, sometimes dubious — but always enterprising.

At parties in this private hideout you could meet Stalag stage stars, band leaders, bookies and merchant princes, and, over a cigar and a spot of 'hooch,' discuss not only the new Ofladium revue, the strange goings-on at the camp spiritualist seances, and the bill at the next 'Four Posts Club' boxing show, but also all the latest news, prices and problems in the wide sphere of Stalag business.

What the Huns were asking for Leica cameras, for instance. The prospects of distilling enough 'Jungle Juice' to run a bar at the dances. Whether all that live poultry was being smuggled in by

lads on 'outside' fatigues. The luck of Diamond Jim, the Maori, at the gambling schools. How long the phenomenal rise in cigarette values would continue. And what commissions 'Hamburg Harry' was executing on his next trip to Munich.

'Hamburg Harry' was a character bound to crop up in any discussion of Stalag rackets. He was a fair-haired, broad-shouldered, good-looking Jerry, who had spent twenty or more years in America, and his calm, worldly, wise-cracking manner was far removed from that of the average Hun.

He was not keen on discussing the war, which he looked on as a boring interference with business, but he never sought popularity with us by disparaging Germany or the Nazi regime. An inveterate racketeer, he brought great quantities of *verboten* articles into the camp, and he took scores of thousands of English cigarettes out of it — allegedly packing his smart 'cavalry cut' breeches with cigarette packets every time he walked through the gates. His job was mainly to do with the parcel store, and he was said to regulate his prices for racket goods by his knowledge of the number of cigarette parcels received in the camp. For the rest, he was generally acknowledged to be as straight as a die in his dealings — and he was more mistrusted than any other Hun in the camp.

How was it, Kriegies asked each other, that while other Jerries were given stiff sentences for racketeering, Hamburg Harry should carry on with such calm confidence? How were we to know that he was not just planted by the Nazis to win our confidence, and keep his ear to the ground? What was he doing in that soft job, anyway? Surely, nobody could swallow his own story: that he had been entirely rejected for front line soldiering because his heart was weak!

Well, we never learnt the whole truth about Hamburg Harry, and we certainly never will now. But in one respect, at least, he was vindicated.

In March '45 he wangled himself leave. In company with another Jerry, who afterwards told us the story, he journeyed to Regensburg, where they were caught in a Flying Fortress raid. They made their way to a shelter, and a bomb fell somewhere outside. No one was injured in the shelter, but a body from outside was somehow blown through the air vent shaft,

and the shock was too great for Hamburg Harry. A heart attack followed and he died in the shelter – a suitcase full of cigarettes beside him.

'Poor old Hamburg!' said some of the Kriegies, when the story got round. 'So it was true about his heart, after all. Well, he was only a Jerry, but he was a pretty straight guy – and, oh, what a Prince of racketeers!'

But though Hamburg Harry and other Jerries played a big part in the Stalag's 'foreign trade,' they were not the only source of imports to the camp. A 'working party' of Frenchmen nearby did odd jobs about the camp, such as carting refuse away, &c., and they carried on a very brisk trade with our own racketeers, selling bread, onions, eggs and garlic for English cigarettes and parcel goods. As many of these Froggies worked on farms in the vicinity, they had plenty of opportunity of 'winning' eggs, chickens, and on one occasion, at least, a sucking pig, which was offered to us for a pair of size nine boots.

Our own Stalag fatigue parties, which left the camp to bring in wood, collect potatoes from the clamps, or fetch rations from German dumps, were also a great source of imports, and were, no doubt, responsible for that fine goose which strutted about in Ten Company, and

which a curious Hun was told had 'just made a forced landing in the compound after wing trouble.'

A big risk was run by those fellows in Five Company where I was shown a fine young deer asleep on a bed, for the creature was a preserve of the Reich, and the penalty for its stealing could be death. The Kriegies intended keeping the deer as a pet, but as it put its foot through a hole in the floor and broke its leg, they were obliged, with or without reluctance, to treat themselves to a feast of venison.

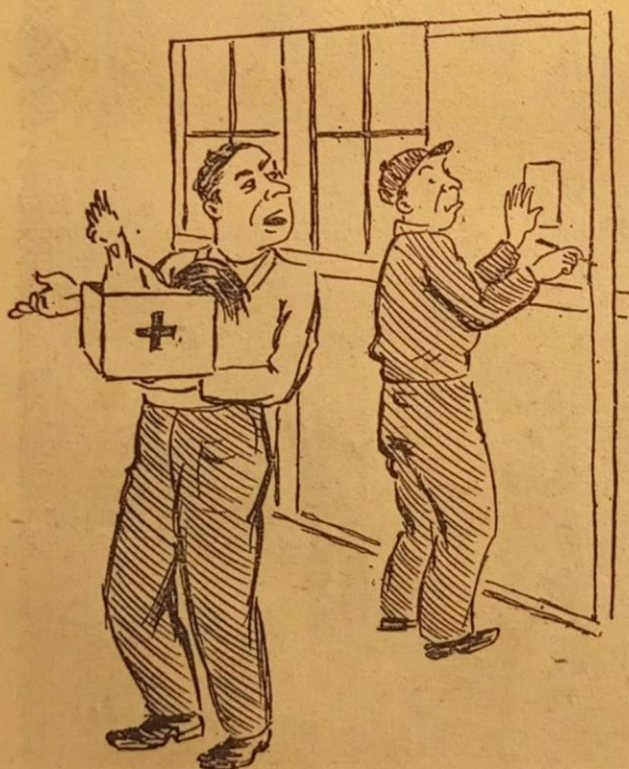
The imports of Stalag 383 were also augmented at times by robbery nearer home. Over a hundred *Wehrmacht* loaves were 'won' in a single evening by fellows who broke into the German bread store just outside the main Lager, and the Jerries were henceforth obliged to store the bread in another building right outside the camp.

The chronic problem of fuel supplies was likewise tackled by 'direct action.' I forget how many tons of timber the Kommandant accused Kriegies of 'sabotaging' from the rows of new double-sized huts which French workers were set to erect on our former sports field, but certainly the hut sections seemed to disappear as fast as they were put up, and the erection of a fence to protect them proved worse than useless, since the racketeers filched most of that, too!

But besides the import and export trade of Hohenfels, there was a good 'home market' which many business and professional gentlemen set themselves to exploit. If a man was lucky enough to get large quantities of cigarettes from home, he could smoke and eat without working, but otherwise it was handy to have some little racket by which to earn an honest fag.

There were carpenters, tinsmiths, rug-makers and a score of other trades who made armchairs, pots and pans, blankets, &c., for the marts; there were tailors, tattooists, signwriters and other artists, and there were amateur barbers galore who, to save you waiting in the official barbers' hut, would cut your hair for a couple of fags and leave you longing for a chance to cut *their* hair some day.

As for the 'rafflers' who would take a live chicken round the huts, or perhaps a Nazi ceremonial bayonet, a portable gramophone,



or a 'twenty-years' guaranteed' watch, you had to admire the cheerful way they ignored the 'keep out' notices on hut doors, but you treated the results of their raffles with considerable reserve, since no one ever met a man who admitted winning anything in an 'unofficial' raffle.

Quite a good business was done by photographers who sold snapshots of camp scenes, or took hut and regimental groups on request, but they often complained that it was not such a profitable racket as it seemed on the surface. Not only were cameras and developing gear expensive things to import in the first place, but being, of course, forbidden to Kriegies they were always being searched for by the snoops, who could wipe out the hard work of months in one lucky swoop on a hut 'dark room.'

The snoops came badly unstuck on one raid, however. Two of them, who had been given orders to make a search for 'candid camera shots' believed to have been taken of the Kommandant, pounced without warning on a hut which proved to be full of photographic material. Pleased with their haul, they were carting the camera and other gear through the

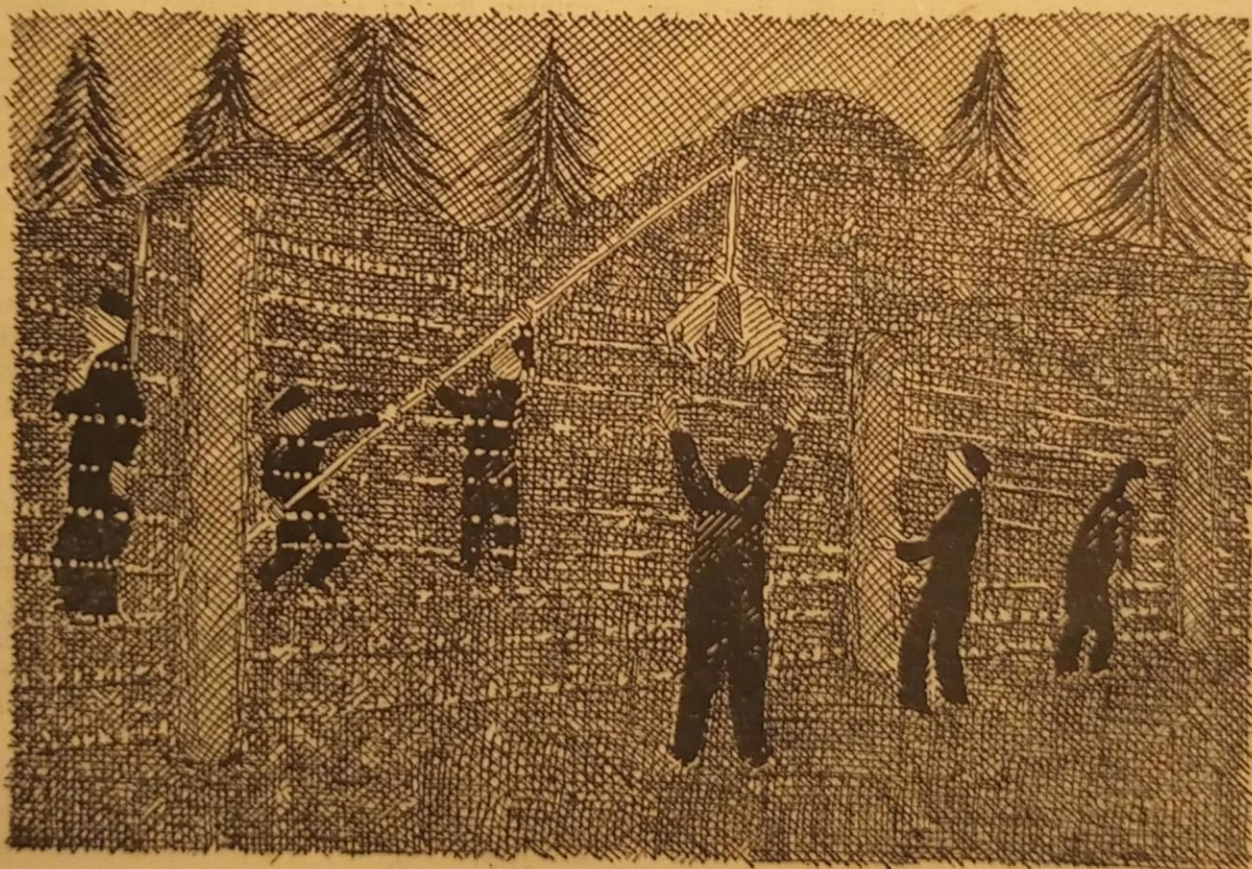
door when they were called back by a smiling Kriegie.

'Here's a picture might interest you,' he said, and he showed them an excellent snap of themselves dealing at one of the marts.

'Okay, Englander . . . you win,' said the snoops, or words to that effect, and with rueful grins they handed back the camera, accepting instead a consolatory smoke.

On the subject of cameras, I should mention here that the Kommandant allowed, under safeguards, one or two 'official' Kriegie photographers to take pictures of the theatre shows and sports, some of which photographs appeared in the 'Next of Kin' magazines at home.

Excellent work in this respect was done by Messrs. Hodges and Chase, whose signatures on a print meant that the snap was safe from confiscation by the Huns. Their stage and sports snaps were printed in quantity and sold at four or five cigarettes a copy in aid of the Theatre and Sports funds. For a very long while the theatre was largely supported by this bright idea, and some Kriegies collected hundreds of stage snaps to take back to freedom.



But there came a time, alas, when men who had gladly paid five cigarettes for single pictures were offering their collections on the mart at five pictures for a single cigarette.

This was no reflection on the theatre, of course, but simply one symptom of the bleak period after Xmas '44 when everything lost value save food and cigarettes. The law of supply and demand worked inexorably in those days, and while every phase of Stalag life was affected, none was more so than the rackets, which completely changed in character.

With thousands of fresh arrivals pouring into Hohenfels from Moosburg, Lamsdorf and other camps, with 'personal' and cigarette parcels as mere memories of the past, with German rations down to starvation level and showing every sign of running out altogether, and with our hopes of receiving Red Cross parcels apparently dependent upon railways which were being bombed day and night, the rackets became more than an amusing side-line for the business-like: they became a tough scramble for food, with elements of gangsterdom introduced by the few.

But only by the few. The great majority of men at Hohenfels, though anxious not to crack up in health on the last lap to freedom, just accepted the hunger and privations of the winter as part of the game.

The average Kriegie might try to raise a few cigs for food by putting his spare belongings on the mart, but when he realized that everybody else was selling too, and that the treasure he was offered six hundred cigarettes for a short while back would not fetch the price of a slice of bread now, he shrugged his shoulders and went back to bed.

He knew that some men were trying to buy cigarettes, through their credits, at prices like £200 per thousand, and that others, who had hoarded up cigarettes for months, were now buying up gold in the form of watches and rings; but as long as no smart guys showed signs of fiddling with camp rations, the normal Kriegie lost interest in rackets. He put up with things as they were; he hoped for better days soon; and if other fellows felt like trading - well, let them get on with it.

And the few *did* get on with it. Trading through the wire, for instance, got gradually more tough. It became a nightly cut-throat

competition, with one group of racketeers bitterly accusing another group of 'invading its territory,' or of paying too high prices to the French and Jerry contacts. Competition came too from a new source. Men who had never before displayed any interest in trading were now fierce hunters of food, haunting the wire for hours at a stretch and offering almost anything for bread and flour.

'Wire' prices soared to new high levels, and French traders at the fence gained whole wardrobes of underwear, pyjamas and shoes. Prices on the marts soared likewise, and there was obviously no agreement between the 'big shots' as to the maximum to be paid for imports. Old time racketeers, now retired, shook their heads sadly. And finally there came the 'Vigilantes.'

These 'Vigilantes,' self-styled and unofficial, announced to the camp that they intended to 'clean up' the rackets by fixing maximum prices for flour and bread, and that they would first warn, and then 'take action against,' any Stalag trader exceeding these prices.

'Sound idea!' said part of the camp; 'Just another racket!' said another part; and with moderate interest, most fellows sat back to await results.

They were worth waiting for. They gave us a good laugh at the time when laughs were precious. For the main outcome of the new idea was a sort of gang warfare between 'strong-arm groups,' who offered themselves as protectors of tradesmen, on the one hand, and parties of bogus 'Vigilantes,' composed of the most notorious thugs in the camp, on the other - the 'Vigilantes' having so strong a sense of public duty that they were prepared to confiscate and eat any grub they came across, racketed or not!

There were several good 'rough-houses' between these rival bands, and at least one case of 'hi-jacking.' A refuse lorry, driven by a Frenchman and laden with concealed racket goods for one gang, was attacked by a rival gang as it entered the gates. This led to a glorious 'free for all' which passing Kriegies joined in joyously, and while it was going on a couple of wily non-combatants got away with the bulk of the flour and the bread - just before astonished Jerries came rushing up to see what was going on.

What would have happened in another few months of this Chicago stuff, and whether some

Stalag Capone would have succeeded in getting control of the rackets is anybody's guess, because just about this time the miraculous arrival of Red Cross food and the breath-taking news from the Allied fronts swept everything else from Kriegies' minds, and even 'Vigilantes' forgot the price of flour as they set to work to pack their kits for home.

But looking back on Hohenfels, we don't forget the rackets. They kept our wits alive in the long, long days of torpor. They gave us food for talk, and they gave us many laughs.

The Stalag was a dreary place at best. It would have been a drearier place still without the rackets. And that's the only tribute that they need.



Griff and Hooch

WHOEVER first said 'no news is good news' was not a prisoner of war.

No news is hell in a prison camp, and it was good of the Kriegies' friends and relations to realize this fact and to try to send us war 'griff' in letters, parts of which were more or less in code.

Some of these letters were so ingeniously cryptic that ex-Kriegies are still puzzling over them now. Others which spoke of 'Uncle Joe making fine progress since Uncle Sam sent him medicine,' &c., were a bit *too* lucid, and much annoyed the Jerry censors, who used to ask us angrily why the writers imagined Germans to be so completely dumb.

But sending war news to Hohenfels was rather a 'coals to Newcastle' business, anyway, because, one way and another, we were at least as well informed on the war situation as most people. This, I suppose, sounds smug – but then we always were a bit smug about our 383 news service.

Not only did we get information from fresh arrivals at the Stalag – Commandos from Norway, 8th Army men from Italy, paratroopers from Arnheim; not only did we have talks with Germans just back from the Eastern Front, some of whom were remarkably frank with us; but we also had, from beginning to end of our stay at Hohenfels, a really first rate Radio Service.

From the first bright hopes of El Alamein right up to the 'dream come true' of liberation, we followed Allied fortunes on the B.B.C. Strange that for two and a half years a regular radio news service could be maintained in a Stalag as swarming with snoops as 383.

The story begins in a drum. A valve set, purchased piece by piece from Hun civilians for English cigarettes, was concealed in a side drum and smuggled into the camp by the first arrivals in September, 1942. It went into immediate action against the dope-sheet 'Camp' which Goebbels printed for prisoners.



B.B.C. bulletins were taken down in shorthand, transcribed and distributed to company commanders, who appointed special 'confidence men' to read out the news in the huts.

Despite all warnings, fellows would discuss the 'griff' in latrines, or in bunks at night, with the result that Nazi noses were soon to the ground and hut-to-hut searches were organized. Yet – with hair-breadth escapes – the set survived. Packed in a cardboard box and shifted from place to place – sometimes stowed beneath the floorboards, sometimes buried in the ground – the precious link with home contrived to function. Volunteer counter-snoops kept watch for the searchers – and a 'special cigarette fund' was prepared in case of need.

By the time the snoops had done their work – so had the cigarettes. Triumphant Huns carted off the first set to the Kommandant's office, but four or five new radios were ready in reserve. They had come 'through the wire' via racketeering sentries, and while a few thousand cigarettes reached the Berlin black market, the news of Allied victories reached us.

For thirty months a ceaseless fight went on. Never did the Nazis cease to search, and many were the hauls they made – but they couldn't stop the 'daily dose of truth.' Frequent searches, sudden swoops and field-glass spotting from watch-towers helped the Huns. Ingenious hide-

outs, constant switches and keen co-operation favoured us.

Underground listening-chambers were dug by volunteers – one in the 'Quiet Room' of the Camp Rover Scouts Crew, another in the potato cellar of the cookhouse. The Scout den hide-out was partly masked by a bookcase and the covering slab was imperceptible, but whilst probing for tunnels Hun searchers chanced upon the chamber. A blow, but not a knock-out. The radio had already been shifted to another hide-out, and a useless set planted in its place. Elsewhere, a set was kept in an accordion, the bass notes of which could still be played. A rugby football hid a smaller set, and a hollowed-out roof beam in another hut survived many a Nazi search.

By means of jelly squares, and copying ink from indelible pencils, a duplicator was made to print the bulletins and facilitate distribution of the news. More than once 'confidence men' were caught red-handed with the slips of paper, but there were always duplicates to follow.

Reports reached Nazi higher-ups, and the Kommandant was worried. Racketeering sentries were threatened with dire penalties; renewed searches were made for secret sets; more snoops were called in to probe the camp. And still the news went on.

Two squareheads entered a hut where a specially valued valve set was in use. Immediately, a Kriegie grabbed for a suitcase, dived between the Huns and vanished through the door. Bellowing fiercely, the Huns gave chase. They caught the Kriegie in the compound and pounced on his case. By the time they discovered it was empty, the radio had been whisked through the window to a place of safety.

A Hun detective (civilian branch) fared worse than the snoops. Entering a hut without escort, he probed about the room in arrogant silence. 'What's a civvy doing in an army joint?' demanded one P.o.W. 'No good, anyway – let's chuck him out!' said the others. And out he went on his Nazi neck.

Oddly enough, this outraged sleuth got scant sympathy from the Kommandant. The 'Englanders' had acted like soldiers he was told.

Next came the Gestapo – a different proposition altogether. So worried was the Kommandant by what the Gefangenen might do, or the Gestapo might find, that he warned us in

advance that these super-sleuths had full powers to enter military establishments. Perhaps it was he, too, who let it leak out exactly when they might be expected.

At any rate, when they rolled up in cars – whole squads of 'em, big brutal fellows with padded shoulders, green trilbys and flashy shoes, it was no surprise to us. All the surprises were reserved for them.

To begin with, the camp itself, always a quagmire, was that January day at its muddy foulest. We were turned out of our huts to find what shelter we could from the drizzling rain in latrines and wash-houses. And we enjoyed ourselves thoroughly!

For the grim, ghoulish Gestapo boys were funnier than Keystone coppers. They lost their tempers in the knee-deep slush and, while we laughed ourselves sick from a distance they vented their wrath on each other, or on the normal Stalag guards who accompanied them.

The trouble was that their chief ordered them to search beneath the hut floors. Now the huts in Nine Company being raised on piles from the ground, the only way to really search between the double floors was to crawl on hands, knees and belly beneath the buildings.

To see a fat-necked, broad-beamed Hun in his Sunday suit crawling under a mud-bogged hut was pleasing. To see him emerge, purple-faced, mud-plastered and hoarse with cursing was better still. But to see one stick his podgy hand between the boards, 'find' some discarded razor blades, and, bleeding and squealing like a stuck pig, aim a kick at the nearest *Wehrmacht* man, who hadn't even laughed, was worth a Red Cross parcel.

Of course they took their reprisals on the Kriegies. Many fellows returned to their huts to find their kits strewn over the floor, their straw paliasses ripped to bits, their photographs and letters kicked about – and their food parcels upside down with condensed milk glueing everything.

But in the radio line the Gestapo drew a blank. Even the set they were meant to find – an old two valve affair, carefully planted in an obviously false-bottomed packing-case armchair – they managed to miss. The Kriegie hut leader, ordered to stop in this hut while the search was on, was turned out of the armchair by the Gestapo director of operations, who plonked

GRIFF AND HOOCH

his own posterior in the seat whilst his underlings pulled up the floor boards, dismantled the stove, stripped the fourteen beds, &c. Net result of all this *arbeit* was the purloining of some pepper – *verboten* at 383 because escapees used it for putting dogs off the scent. The radio stayed put under the seat of the mighty.

When the Gestapo, mud on their clothes, murder in their eyes, finally drove off, the B.B.C. bulletins were brought round as usual. Appended was a footnote from MacKenzie stating drily that today's 'visitors' had complained bitterly about the foul condition of the camp. How our hearts bled for them!

But though the Kommandant was perhaps gratified that Himmler's hounds had achieved

less than the Stalag snoops, he did not rest on his laurels. A new Security officer was added to the staff; keener, more cunning snoops were spared from outside duties – and a new drive began against the 'Voice of Britain.' Nor was the Hun without his triumphs.

A bombardier in One Company, for instance, brought out his valve set one day from its rabbit-hutch hiding place, and settled down snugly on his bunk, earphones on his head.

'Was ist das?' came a guttural voice behind him.

'Sssh!' frowned the bombardier, wagging a finger.

'Was ist das, Engländer?' came the voice, a bit louder.





'Shut up, can't you! . . . I've got London and . . .'

The Kriegie's voice trailed off as the field-grey uniform came into view.

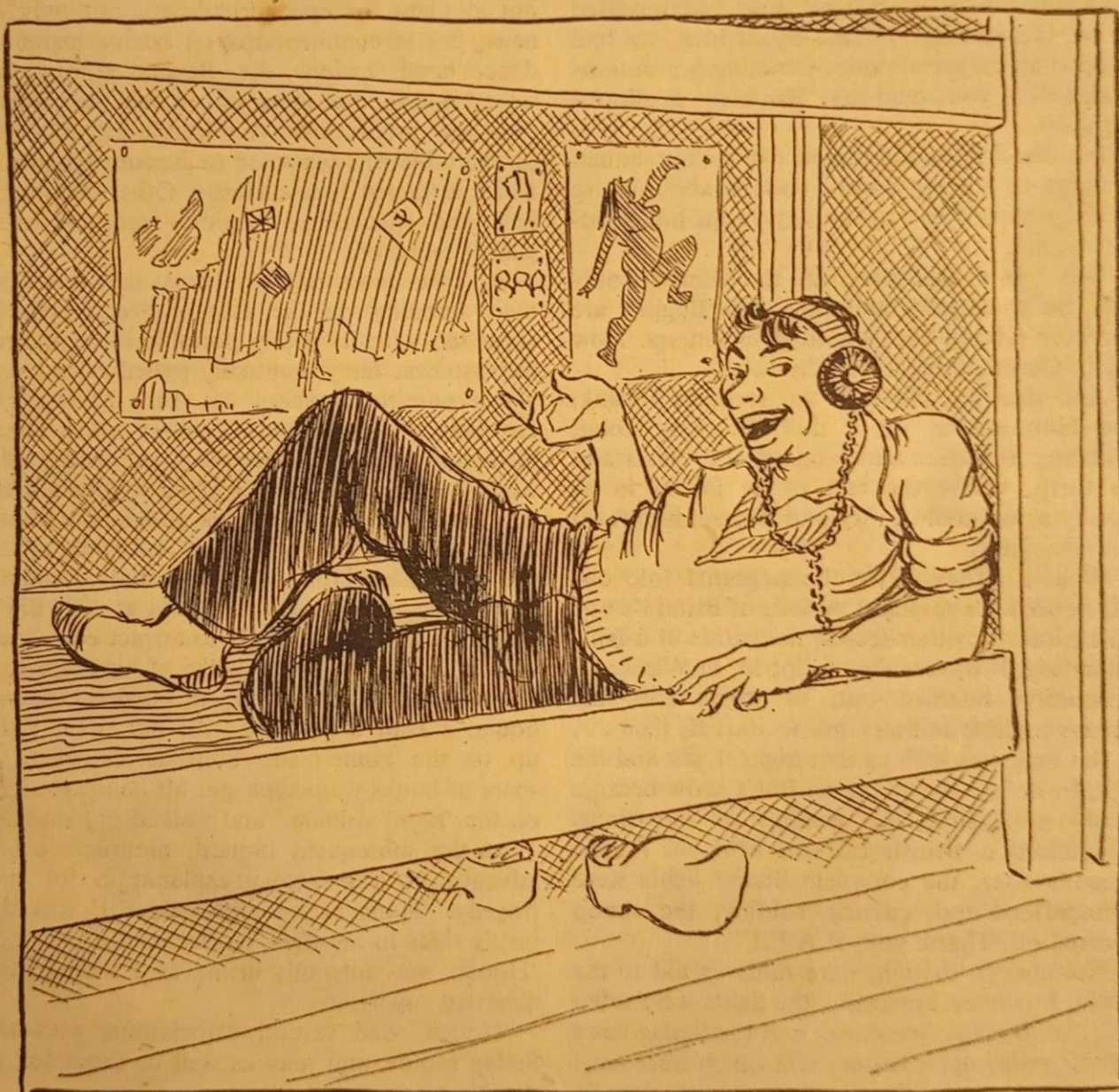
'Well, thank Gawd the buzzard didn't get the other pair of headphones!' was the bombardier's remark, as radio under arm, the Jerry reached the door.

The Hun turned back. 'So, my friend! You have still more forbidden articles, eh?' he said in perfect English, and from a rather crestfallen bombardier he completed a useful haul.

It was not long before we grasped that several of the new snoops had been chosen for their knowledge of English - an accomplishment

which some of them liked to conceal. There followed some good, clean fun in testing these crafty Nazis. A snoop had to be poker-faced indeed who could stand a hutful of Kriegies discussing his horrible appearance, dubious parentage and probable fate without exploding into Hunnish hysterics.

A queer experience with an English-speaking snoop befell Hut Sixteen. Unknown even to our neighbours we were, for some time, in possession of a unique set obtained in a unique manner, which I cannot reveal. An all-electric set, equipped with four miniature valves and a single glass earphone which plugged into the ear, this tiny set was kept in a book, the inner pages of



which had been cut out to form a sort of box.

It was operated by Sergt. Bill Spink of the 'Phantom' unit, who occupied a top bunk near the hut door. Bill would sit up on his bunk apparently absorbed in the book on his knees and thanks to a clever arrangement of wires, nothing could be seen connecting him with the radio set.

Occasionally, however, quite a bit could be heard until the sergeant manipulated the volume control. Apart from sometimes reading aloud some particularly important headline, Bill would take the safe course of listening silently and trusting to memory to give us the correct dope later.

One night, however, Churchill was speaking, and Bill broke his general rule and repeated aloud the stirring phrases. By ill luck, we had slipped up on certain door-jamming precautions and, before you could say 'Winston,' in slipped a snoop.

Bill switched in mid-sentence of a Churchillian passage to an impromptu remark about horse racing – the subject, by the way, of the hollowed-out book.

'Ah!' said the Jerry, in the slimy-friendly way he sometimes affected, 'you English are for ever talking about betting on horses. Now we in Germany regard the horse as . . .'

And drawing close to the sergeant's bunk, the Hun started on a dull discourse about breeding in horses and humans and Nazis and so forth, whilst the rest of us joined in as noisily as we could to try and distract him from Bill's vicinity.

What a situation for the sergeant! Into one ear poured the resonant periods of Britain's war chief; into the other seeped the words of a Nazi underling. If the earphone slipped, or Winston's peroration boomed out, or worse still, the always audible military music started, then . . .

But luck was with us that night. Luck and the R.A.F. Before the sweat on Bill's brow became really noticeable, the wailing of the sirens announced a British call on Munich. A few seconds later, the complete Stalag lights were extinguished and, cursing volubly, the snoop sheered off. Thank you, R.A.F.!

Not always, though, were raids an aid to the radio. In winter, especially, the lights were often off, due to planes overhead, and the Stalag news service relied upon battery sets which were hard to keep in service. Scores of crystal sets were in

the camp, whose owners claimed to pick up the most fantastic news from the most improbable stations; but most of us concluded that the 'crystals' were in contact with some other planet, where a war even more incredible than our own was being fought.

These crystal sets could often be purchased at the marts, and though they were not, of course, openly displayed, it was not difficult for a Kriegie to interpret a notice: 'Canary for sale. Good singer. Only one ear.' as indicating that a crystal set with one headphone was on offer.

Loudspeaker radios were naturally not common. One hut, however, used to be packed out at night for open broadcasts, not only of news, but of commentaries on boxing matches, dance band sessions, &c. Beyond storing the set outside the hut when not in use, the owners took few precautions. A portable gramophone on the table was supposed to account for music which attracted Hun curiosity. Otherwise, blind luck and squarehead stupidity were the safeguards relied on.

But you can't rely on Huns – not even on their stupidity. In the case of Sergt. Spink's super-set, with its neatly portable hiding-place, for instance, Jerry eventually pulled off a coup which admittedly shook us. Bill, having left Hut Sixteen for a supposedly safer one in Three Company, enjoyed a few months' listening-in without any real alarms. When a routine search was made, he would just pick up his fake book, together with some real ones, and walk off to the Stalag school for a little quiet study. Reading being a common accomplishment at 383, Bill's bookishness was not likely to attract comment.

One doleful day then, judge of his surprise – his indignation almost – when, outside listening hours, a Hun walked into the hut, went right up to the home-made bookshelves where a score of books were kept, put his hands straight on the 'radio volume,' and walked out smiling.

At the subsequent inquest, mourners could advance no satisfactory explanation for this tragedy. 'Huns aren't all so dumb!' was the jury's rider to an open verdict, and a bottle of 'Hooch' was solemnly drunk as a toast to the departed super-set.

'Hooch' had several associations with the Stalag radios, and may as well be explained in this chapter.

It originated, I think, when the local Jerry brewery, having a surplus of *ersatz* beer, decided to unload it on the helpless British Kriegies. A hundred or so barrels rolled up in time for the great sports fête and fair which we held on the August Bank Holiday of 1943. The phoney beer was paid for in equally phoney Stalag Marks, and was duly drunk.

Shortly afterwards, German orders announced that there were over fifty empty beer barrels missing – and that the most drastic steps, &c. . .

Well, some of the barrels had already been converted into private bath tubs, rabbit hutches, armchairs, &c., but a few of the others were being used to brew something a lot stronger than they had ever held before. Raisins and prunes, with a little yeast, were soaked in the barrels and the mash left to stand for about ten days. Then a distilling apparatus, constructed out of old tins and a little copper tubing, was fitted up over a hut stove, and enough wood was racketeered from somewhere to distil an amazingly potent spirit.

Apart from being slowly poisonous, 'Jungle Juice,' as we called it, was a classy product and was highly popular as a means of toasting triumphs. Great Allied victories were drunk to in 'Jungle Juice.' So were our own little triumphs.

When the camp succeeded, for example, in raising over five thousand pounds for a 'special fund'; when, by means of ingenious code letters from our own Sergt. Miles-Osborne to Mr. Duncan Sandys, a Spitfire was purchased with it; and when we heard that this fighter of ours had been christened 'Unshackled Spirit' and had been in action – then we felt that a drink of

something was definitely called for. So the many bootleggers in the camp did a roaring trade, and the Huns were sore perplexed by the all-night sing-songs in the huts.

A comical sequel to their eventual discovery of the 'Hooch' secret was a visit by a high Nazi official, who marched into one of the hut distilleries, bellowed himself purple in the face – and finally demanded to sample the stuff. Some weeks after he had been assisted away, the Stalag received official Hun notice that the distilling of intoxicants was emphatically forbidden to prisoners of war – and that under the laws of the Third Reich a heavy sum of money was due from us as excise duty!

That Teutonic thunderbolt gave the bootleggers a good belly-laugh – particularly since they now had keen customers amongst the Jerries, including one or two officers who liked to drown their sorrows.

It was not Hun taxation demands, nor the vigilance of snoops, that led to the dismantling of the stills: it was an order from the British M.O., backed up by the good sense of the men, who realized that 'Jungle Juice' was no better for one's innards than Jerry rations. So down came the stills, and into safe storage went existing bottles . . . perhaps to be matured for the greatest day of all . . . perhaps to be useful in ways yet unforeseen.

And one of these bottles proved useful indeed. Useful to our precious radio service.

It was in the dark days of February '45, when, to add to our other troubles, we were much shorter than usual of workable radios. Many of the private sets had gone out of action owing to shortage of racketable goods to buy new valves, &c. And then, one gloomy night, came a worse blow still. From hut to hut there passed the mournful griff: 'The Huns have got the last real working set. No news tomorrow, fellows!'

True enough, a snoop had rumpled the camp's best set and had carted it victoriously to a certain Hun officer. But now new factors swayed the long-fought fight.

The Hun examined the radio with interest – interest that gave way to horror. The set was a special type of military set. It had come from a *Wehrmacht* store at Munich. Circumstances pointed strongly to connivance by German officers. Had the Englanders 'Hooch' proved stronger than Nazi devotion to duty?



Crystal Set News

What a disgrace to the *Wehrmacht*! What a case for the Gestapo! What further scandals might be revealed in a real investigation? And who, at 383, could feel himself safe in a thorough S.S. showdown?

Perhaps these were the very thoughts that troubled the Hun. These that caused his strange decision.

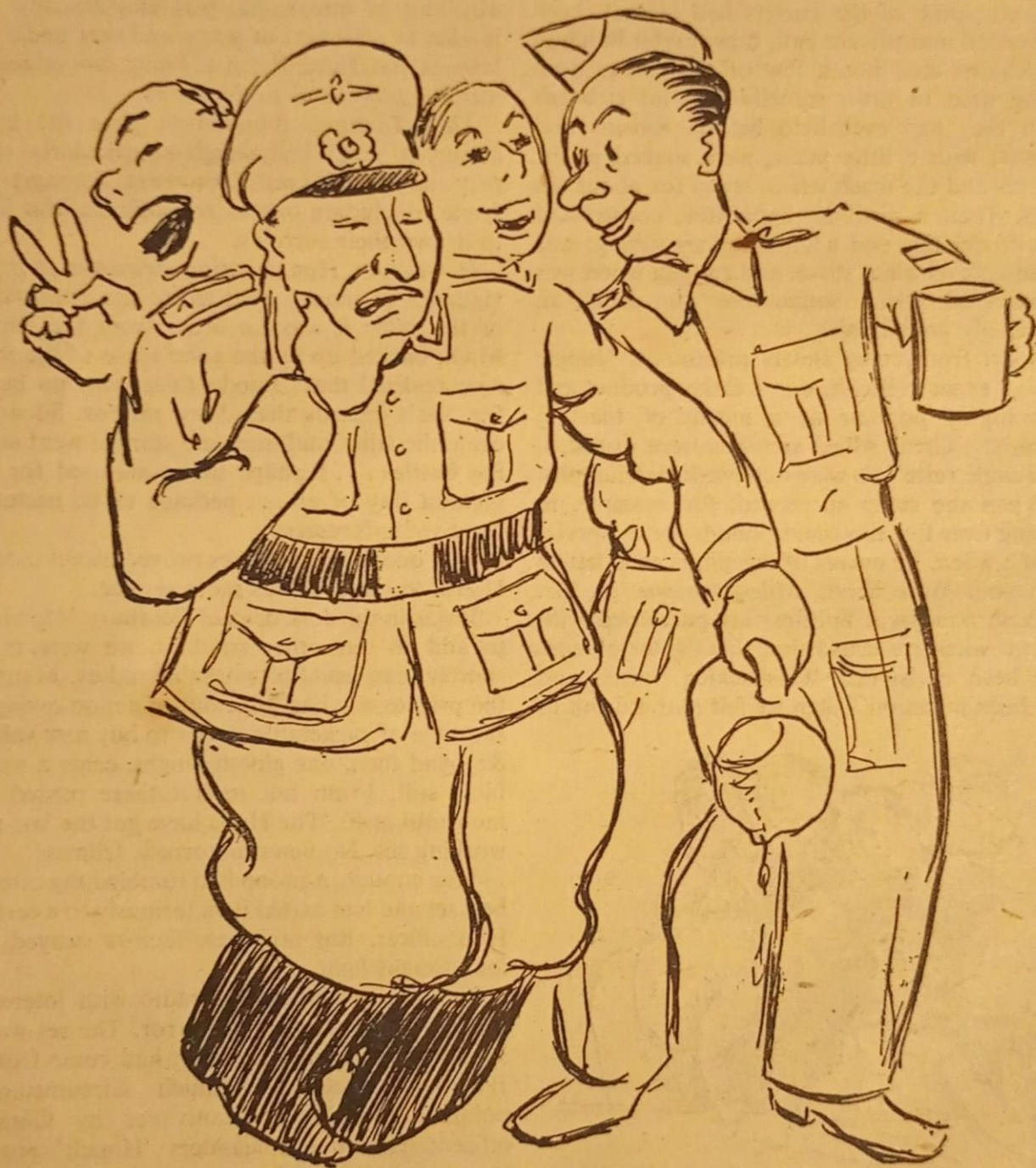
'Break the valves - and give it back,' he

ordered the snoop. But the shrug of his shoulders said more than his words.

So the snoop, too, used his loaf.

Back in the hut where he had made his haul, he put the set carefully on the table. 'Seems a pity to smash a thing like this,' he said deliberately. 'You don't happen to have a bottle of anything, do you?'

They had. And the radio war was won.



But No Women

'PRISONERS of war are strictly forbidden to approach, or have friendly intercourse with German women. Breaches of this order will be met with severe imprisonment, and in serious cases (particularly where sexual intercourse is involved) with punishment of death.'

This pleasant pronouncement, less nicely worded, was issued by the German High Command to be read out or posted up at stated intervals in all prison camps in the Third Reich. It was the only official reminder prisoners ever had of the existence of women – and it excited more derision than almost any Nazi order issued.

Many Kriegies, of course, never glimpsed a female, German or otherwise, for years on end. Many others found that shortage of food blotted out sex as a subject of interest anyway. But even on 'working parties,' where some point was lent to the order by the fact that prisoners mixed daily with German girls, it was generally regarded as Hitler's worst joke. It stunk with hypocrisy. It's underlying assumption was based on a conception of 'Nazi Womanhood' ludicrously false to the facts.

As a certain gunner remarked, after the reading out of the order on a working party parade: 'It sounds as though Jerry girls were a bunch of vestal virgins – and we were a crowd of morons, panting after 'em. Well, I've not met one who rates herself above a bar of chocolate – but I still think I'll stick to the Missus!'

And the gunner was not ungallant, nor censorious. It was just that propaganda about 'Clear-eyed Nordic Maidens' and 'Noble Nazi Wives,' coupled with threats of the gallows to those who dared approach them, shed a rather ironic light on the actual Fraus and Frauleins we came across.

Many of these seemed almost comically sex-obsessed, much given to suggestive banter, and singularly poor champions of feminine dignity in their tame submission to their own menfolk. For if many Huns were brutal in their treatment of the girl slave workers, their attitude to their



own women was seldom better than boorish.

In the early days in Deutschland, some of us were surprised that German guards should invite our attention, with crude gestures, to German girls passing near the wire, and that others should exhibit photographs of their own wives, and wisecrack coarsely about them, while even the following petty incident was an eye-opener in more senses than one.

We – a party of N.C.O. prisoners – were being marched towards a station one winter's day when there came in sight a stately, well groomed blonde, accompanied by two Luftwaffe officers.

Just as they drew level with our squad, one of her escorts drew the Fraulein's attention to the British Gefangenen. As she turned her head, the other stepped quickly forward and then dropped, almost flat, in her path, thus 'making a back' for her. The next second the blonde was standing on her head, face in snow, legs in air, her startled squeals drowned in the guffaws of the Luftwaffe.

Naturally, we enjoyed the show, but discussing it later, it seemed a bit tough on the girl, who must have been pretty shaken by her somersault. We wondered what she'd said to her gallant cavaliers.

Nothing, probably. Later, on a working party where we mixed with German factory and office

girls, we found them strangely docile to the male Huns' whims.

'Why doesn't she sock somebody?' we'd ask each other as Gretchen, perhaps, busy at a work-bench, would be given a pinch, slap, or similar salute by almost every Jerry who passed, and whether it was that Gretchen was afraid of being socked back, or that she was proud to be noticed anyway by the 'warrior sex,' we couldn't quite decide.

There were pretty girls in plenty amongst these German workers and, thanks to the loot from Europe, they were not short of frocks, make-up and Nylons, so that the 'frumpish Fraulein' gibe was a bit played out. As for their legendary plumpness, it was so often situated in the right places that they met little criticism on that score, whilst Deutsch, though harsh enough when bellowed by a jack-booted Hun, can be music itself when voiced by a smiling *Madchen*.

Nevertheless, despite the Frauleins' flattering interest in 'Tommy,' and despite attempts to please by telling us bluer jokes about Hitler than we could make up ourselves, or by giving us news, usually false, of Allied successes, the German girls had few admirers amongst the British Kriegies. Even those fellows who occasionally 'invested' a bar of chocolate with them seemed to be acting more from defiance of the High Command death threats than anything else.

There were several things we didn't like about the Frauleins. They seemed to us to be typically Nazi in more important respects than lip service to the Fuehrer. They had the same Hun indifference to suffering in others. The same Hun hardness to all who were down.

Some Kriegies who had worked in that part of Germany during the bitter winter of 1940 recalled that, when they were famished and frostbitten, when they were without clothes, parcels and news from home . . . when, in short, they were 'down,' they noticed no friendly smiles from German women. Instead they remembered that on the occasional Sundays when they were not forced to work, but had to parade nearly naked in the yard of their *Lager*, holding up lousy shirts, &c., for inspection by the Huns, it was not made pleasanter by the presence at the wire of Fraus and Frauleins, much tickled at the plight of the Englishers.

Others remembered those well dressed women

on a Prussian station who, when a cattle truck was opened to let starving Russians drag out the corpses of their comrades, laughed and joked. Still others spoke bitterly of tender German mothers holding up their kiddies so that they could get a better view of two Jews hanging in the local sports ground.

True – and happily true for one's sense of proportion – there were other types of German women. Anna, for instance, whose only son had gone down with the *Bismarck*, but who, from sheer human kindness, risked her neck to help some British boys escape from the factory, and plump old Gertrude, wife of my 'human hairpin' boss, who wept so bitterly over the misery of the foreign slave girls that 'Hairpin' raised his bony fist and solemnly cursed Hitler and all he stood for.

Nor will some of us on that working party forget the kindness shown us at a small local hospital, where the Catholic Sisters – I am not a Catholic myself – were equally charming to Britishers, Poles or Germans under their care.

But, shining exceptions apart, our general impression of German women, and especially of the younger ones we worked with, was not high. It seemed that the Nazi spirit had defeminized them. They were wax to the boorish and brutal – stone to the weak or unfortunate.

Even when one of their own number died in the factory, under circumstances sordid but sad, the attitude of her Fraulein fellow-workers was revealingly tough. The girl's body was put in a sort of tumbril, roughly covered with sheets of paper and wheeled away through the factory gates, while – apart from an eagerness to tell us the precise cause of the sudden death – the only emotion the Frauleins showed was a sort of ghoulisish glee.

This being their attitude to one another, it was not to be expected that the German girls would show much sympathy for the foreign slaves. Nor did they.

In fact, it was their indifference to the plight of the Polish and Russian women that showed them in the poorest light of all.

Such sympathy as these slave workers (some of them mere girls, some of them mothers of children) received at that factory came from the British Kriegies, and when our fellows dived into their Red Cross and clothing parcels to help them the Frauleins were apt to be resentful.

Apt to make reports where even Huns had shut their eyes.

The Russian women had, outwardly, naught save their misery to commend them. Mainly of the peasant type, they were ill fed, scarecrow clothed and shod in clogs and foot rags. Herded about like cattle, they were forced to work on the heavy task of loading wood pulp, and they were supervised by Hun oafs armed with batons – batons they did not shrink to use.

Despite the language difficulty, our men found ways to communicate with the Russians, and gifts of food, clothing and soap were left in places where the women would find them. In return they left notes of gratitude which, when translated by a Polish communist, often spoke of their indifference to ill treatment, but of their longing to see their children again – and these notes gave some Kriegies a new outlook on Soviet women.

'I didn't think they . . . well, sort of felt things like that . . . ' said one lad. 'I'd always understood that they just had their babies and then stuck 'em away in communal homes. Seems that I was wrong.'

But at that time, most people were wrong about most things Russian. Long before news of Soviet victories came through, odd Germans, back from the Eastern front, expressed a grudging admiration for Russian women. It seemed that their attitude to invading troops was much prouder than in some countries the Huns had overrun, and that the Bolshevik 'free love' Jerry had read about was not extended to enemy troops.

However, though the British prisoners gave help to the Russian women, they naturally had closer ties with the Polish girls, who were far more 'Western' in type. These girls were of all classes from farm girls to typists, some of them having been abducted by German 'press gangs' whilst shopping in Polish towns, others having been taken from their homes after five minutes' grace to prepare for their exile.

Unlike the Russian women, they received occasional clothes from home and were given an odd evening free from their camp. They managed to provide themselves with powder and lipstick, and, though they lived and worked under conditions terrible for girls, they made brave efforts to keep themselves attractive.

There were one or two near beauties amongst them, lucky to avoid 'more comfortable' jobs

in Hun officers' clubs, and there were quite a few to whom the circumstances lent a certain glamour.

So it was not surprising that the natural sympathy between the Polish girls and the British Kriegies led, in some cases, to 'romances,' which were carried on by notes in pidgin Deutsch and by risky meeting in odd corners of the factory.

To these trysts, the Romeo might bring an offering of chocolate, and the Juliet . . . well, anything from a piece of bread or a Polish poem to some lovingly executed darning. Any little thing to show that, even if the friendship was not platonic, it was on a vastly different footing from Tommy's affairs with the German girls.

Apart from the comparative few who 'courted' particular Polish girls – one of whom, at least, was determined to marry his lady after the war – there were plenty of Kriegies who spared their weekly bar of chocolate from the parcel to give to any Polish girl they happened to notice – these gifts being mere tokens of Allied good will, repayable only with a smile.

Kriegies being human, however, it was usually the prettiest girls who got the chocolate – until a gruff remark by a tough Scot evidently caused thought.

'Tis nae only the bonnie lasses likes sweeties' was all he said, and none, at the time, even commented on his words. Next week, though, the parcels were dipped into as never before . . . none of the ugly ducklings was neglected . . . all the Cinderellas went to the ball . . . and one badly crippled youngster received more gifts than even Sandra, the undisputed belle of the factory. Nice work, Jock!

What a pity, what a damnable pity, that some other words Jock spoke were not so heeded. The story of the British Kriegies and the Polish slave girls ends in tragedy. It need not have done had his sane advice been taken.

Two younger men on that party were taking a foolish risk. They were bribing Hun guards to let them out of the camp on certain nights to see their girl friends. A payment of cigarettes . . . an agreement to be back in two hours . . . a system of signals . . . it was all so simple.

'Laddies,' said the Scot, 'dinna' do it . . . dinna' stake your lives on the promise of a Hun!'

And for a time they didn't. Then, months later at Hohenfels, I got a postcard – a photo-

graph of twin British graves in a German cemetery. I hardly needed to hear the story.

One last visit to the girls, no doubt. A German woman spying through her curtains. A flurry of skirts as she hastens to report. Panic amongst the guards as they visualize inquiries. A slipping back of rifle bolts as the Englanders return, and . . . dead men tell no tales.

Well, there were no tragedies like that at Hohenfels; no fatalities due, indirectly, to the nearness of women. But there was no lack of wretchedness and despair and sickening suspense for the opposite reason – the complete separation from women. In particular, there was much misery caused by broken marriages, for, while all the forces suffered from the fruits of separation, perhaps no section was so badly placed as the caged-in Kriegies, denied the age-old balm of 'consolation.'

It is no secret that great numbers of prisoners of war got divorces whilst in Germany and that great numbers more would have had ample grounds to do so. Nor is it surprising that after four or five years of separation, bridged only by the skimpy Stalag mail, so many marriages should fall to bits.

One factor tending to give Stalag 383 its full share of break-ups was the number of men who had married, or been married, on the strength of their promotions. These romances seemed to run to type – the usual story (see 'Pams Paper') running something like this.

Tom, a young sergeant, marries, while on leave from France, Jean, a girl he hardly knows. Peggy, his old school-friend, eats her heart out silently. Tom is captured at Dunkirk, has a very thin time for a very long while, and only keeps his spirits up with thoughts of Jean. The young wife, however, working in a factory and daily meeting other men, finds Tom's memory apt to fade. He becomes a mere army number through whom she gets some money.

The years roll on, and Jean's letters to the sergt. get fewer . . . and colder. Then they stop altogether. There follows months of anguish for Tom – and then he hears once more. Jean has met a Yank. He wants to marry her. Will Tom give her her freedom? Divorce will be simple, since she's just had a baby.

The sergt's hutmates guess about that letter. They also suffer from it. From a mere brooder, always waiting for the mail, Tom now becomes

a bitter cynic, wounded in his pride. He's a pretty hard fellow to live with for a while.

One day he can hold it back no longer. He bursts out with his story, tears up Jean's letters for the hut stove, burns her photograph thereon, pours forth scorn on womankind in general, and announces his future as a hater of the sex.

That clears the air a bit. Then Tom finds that many other fellows have been 'let down' too, which is something of a solace. With them, he lets off steam at the Stalag debates – an ideal safety valve for Stalag cynics.

And then he gets another letter. That's right – from Peggy! Peggy has been given his address by Tom's sister. She writes to ask what sort of cigarettes he'd like, and she ventures to enclose her photograph ('wretched of me, really, but perhaps you'll recognize it') and the next thing Tom's pals know is that he is offering fantastic sums for letter cards, and is happily engaged in framing Peggy's picture, which all agree adorns the hut no end. Later, he celebrates his engagement with a 'Hooch' party in the hut.

But, if we all knew affairs no more fatal than Tom's, there were also plenty of broken marriages which left scars on a man's mind. Cases of men, happily married for years and with children to seal the contract, learning by letter that their wives had left them, just foisting the children on reluctant in-laws. Cases of men living in Othello-like agonies of suspicion until their worst fears were confirmed, and then devoting themselves to dark and bitter brooding on the future.

Sometimes the wife would use imagination. Would realize that a man caged-in for years is easily unbalanced, and would write the type of letter best calculated to ease the wound. Others were not so kind – or wise.

One woman, three years after her husband had been wounded and captured, discovered that she 'could no longer be tied to a coward' and wanted her freedom so that she could marry a 'real man' – the 'real man' apparently having a reserved occupation.

That letter nearly deranged the husband's mind, but no doubt the writer had cause to regret it, for the classic sequel to many 'let downs' was that, shortly after the wife's allowance had been stopped, her new found lover disappeared, leaving her to write rather awkward letters to the P.O.W. husband.

Over ordinary lapses – the type of case where a wife sorrowfully admitted that she had ‘been to a dance,’ &c., and that it would not happen again, there was much tolerance shown, and there were ‘foster-fathers’ at Hohenfels who would display photographs of babies with almost the pride of the usual ‘daddy.’ Rather touching, eh?

Perhaps it was because there were so many of these cases that they were not taken unduly to heart, for certainly there was precious little attempt by some injured hubbies to hide their wounds. Some of them, indeed, seemed only too anxious to share the ‘joke’ with the Stalag.

The hero whose wife wrote that she had been a ‘bad girl,’ but the baby was really rather sweet, and would it be all right if she bought hubby a motor bike? was justly proud of his answer, which told her sternly that she’d have to make it a side-car too while she was about it!

Then the Kriegie, whose faithful spouse had ‘found a dear little boy on the front doorstep’ and wanted her husband’s advice on the matter, surely mixed kindness with caution in telling her that ‘findings were keepings’ this time – but she’d better give the neighbours a chance with the next windfall.

As for that tough Londoner whose wife wrote that fifteen years of married life had convinced her that they were not ‘temperamentally suited’ to one another, and that she had therefore married (legally wedded was the term she used) a Canadian, he might have found it hard to express himself on a Stalag postcard – but he certainly made a pretty perfect start. ‘Dear Mrs. What’s-your-blinking-name?’ he began, so the rest didn’t matter.

But I must hasten to add to these tales of married woe that, if numerous, they were not disproportionately so. The majority of men at Hohenfels were patiently waited for by their wives and sweethearts, whose loyalty was a prisoner’s greatest solace.

Girls who stuck to their engagement during five years’ separation – often to a man wounded before capture, or undermined in health since – wives who wrote almost daily to husbands who could seldom reply – sisters and aunts and cousins and girl friends who kept up a correspondence inevitably one-sided – all these and, above all, perhaps, the mothers, dependable

through thick and thin, prevented any general cynicism about women.

Many Kriegies, in fact, got engaged during captivity – one, at least, to a girl he’d never seen. A charming ‘cheer-up’ message, slipped into a packet of biscuits and intended for any P.O.W. who opened it, led to this little romance.

Other Kriegies corresponded with delightfully mysterious maidens who’d sewn messages and addresses into such things as battle dresses from England. When requested to send photographs, these sirens invariably posted suspiciously beautiful ‘bathing belle’ snaps, on which the Jerry censors might add approving comments. If the correspondence developed, however, the Kriegie would eventually receive a genuine photo, and apologies, totally unnecessary, for the previous fake snaps.

But perhaps the best opening for a Stalag love story was in a Canadian Red Cross parcel received at Hohenfels. On opening the packet of raisins, a lucky Kriegie found a little gold watch, obviously, whether by accident or design, from the wrist of a lovely lady. That Kriegie swore that he would never rest until he had personally slipped it back on the wrist it came from. Booked your passage yet, George?

Yes, there were precious few misogynists behind the wire, and so eager did some men become for the mere sight of a girl that practically any village Fraulein passing near the camp would bring a flock of fellows to the fence.

Observing this, ‘Stalag Happies’ evolved a system of look-outs, whereby the sighting of a girl was announced by the shouting of a certain mad word – a double-barrelled, surrealistic sort of word, so completely crazy as descriptive of a girl, or, for that matter, of anything, that it tickled even the sane and was echoed and re-echoed throughout the camp.

Crude fun, of course, and soon dropped by general consent when overworked by the minority, but there were some good laughs to be had out of the attitude of the Hun Guards to this unfathomable word. They held confabs, consulted dictionaries, called in interpreters – all in vain. Then they waylaid Kriegies who spoke German, begging and bribing them to reveal the meaning.

This sublime opportunity was not wasted, and by the time the Huns had finished sorting out the various weird explanations they were given,

they weren't quite sure whether the Englishers had gone mad at last, or whether the word had something to do with a mass escape and an attempt on the Fuehrer's life.

But it must not be supposed that we were one big crowd of smarties, for ever pinning the laugh on the poor, dumb Hun. No doubt Jerry got as much amusement from us as we did from him – and in this 'no women' situation he admittedly laughed last.

Fritz could, after all, walk out with Frieda, and he could, if he wished, give her plenty to giggle about in tales of the mad Gefangeners. With tales, for instance, of their bizarre ballroom nights.

For, yes, we did hold dances, and they were a bit bizarre. No other word quite fits these Stalag Hops, where teak-faced Aussies waltzed with grim-lipped Scots, the partners oblivious of each other as the music took them back to Matilda or Maggie, and Sydney or Glasgow and all the long-lost joys of normal life.

Let's peep into the 'Palais' when a gala dance is on. A dance, let's say in early '43.

The Palais, by the way, is a fair-sized wooden hall, begged or bribed or blackmailed from the Huns. It's not too brightly lighted and it's very tightly packed, but the scene, by Stalag standards, ranks as brilliant.

A platform at one end holds Dennis Whiteley's dance band. Khaki trousered, blue shirted, smartly groomed, they swing their way through a quickstep, danced to, more or less, by the flower of 383.

All ranks are present from Stalag Promotions to R.S.M.s. There are boys in Air Force blue, one or two in Navy, and a few Scots in kilts. There are Aussies in their dapper tunics, Kiwis, Canadians, Cypriots, Palestinians – all the varied types, in fact, of Hohenfels, all freshly shaved, trimly dressed, and with enough grease on their hair to polish the floorboards, which are rather on the rough side for dancing.

And then there are the *girls* . . . the dancing partners . . . the call-em-what-you-wills, in their dazzling evening gowns, their dainty little shoes, and their nicely bandeaued hair styles.

Not many, really. Not nearly enough to give everyone a dance – but enough to catch the eye and enough to dress the hall. They're the brightest spot of colour in the Palais.

We can see them better now. Hugh Cameron,

tonight's M.C., has just announced a Tango, and as Dennis and his band slide into 'Jealousy' the floor clears of all but expert dancers. Of all but expert dancers and the *girls*. The rest just stand aside and watch and chatter – the comments bearing mainly on the *girls*.

'Who's the piece in blue satin?' . . . 'Look at old Ginger treading on the Blondie's dress!' . . . 'Don't tell me that's your china in the green rigout!' . . . 'Of course, the hands give 'em away.' . . . 'Wig, or not, it's pretty marvellous!' . . . 'That Spanish turnout's wearing that pansy scarf the Aunt sent me. Must have bought it on the mart' . . . 'Paint, powder, lipstick – beats me where they get it all!' . . . 'Wonder what real girls would think of this – laugh or think it cissy?' . . .

I wonder, too. Some girls, perhaps, would be so intrigued by the 'dernier cri' model gowns on view that they'd only want the name of the designer – but other people might well be puzzled to know how this dance girl business started – and ended. So here, to close this chapter, is the story.

The dances started in the first winter at Hohenfels. Only a few hundred could attend each week, but for them the hops provided entertainment, exercise, and a chance to meet new pals. Just to get away from the same few faces in the same small hut was a treat in Stalag life. Just to have a real motive for pressing your pants and sprucing up generally was a tonic, while, for those who cared for dance music, Davie Laird, Dennis Whiteley, Spike Keble, and other maestros provided good bands – just sufficiently besprinkled with beginners to add a sporting interest to tricky pieces.

So more and more Kriegies flocked to the hops, and plenty who first stormed the Palais for a laugh ended by enrolling in dancing classes, specially run by Stalag experts.

Aby organized by Dave Shearer, the dances soon became more elaborate, and on special occasions fancy dress balls were staged, which led quite naturally to feminine costumes. At these affairs, a knight in biscuit tin armour might waltz with a Pompadour, powdered and crinolined, or a Geisha girl, wigged and kimono'd.

Cabaret shows were also featured, and star female impersonators of the Theatre and Club shows might appear in an interval turn. Some

of these stage *girls* made it a rule to change into trousers as soon as their act was over, but others didn't mind a dance or two in their feminine finery and were popular as partners because they naturally accepted the woman's role in dancing, which most Stalag steppers found difficult.

A few fellows who had made, or displayed, frocks for a special 'best costume' competition were induced to wear them at subsequent dances, and the ranks of the skirted were also joined by a few jokers who, from sheer tomfoolery, enjoyed dressing up in a burlesque of girls' attire.

All very natural, of course, so when a few more Kriegies, neither entertainers nor costume competitors, started turning up to dances in evening gowns there were few eyebrows raised for a time.

Most fellows thought it rather sporty of them to brave the cold and the leg-pulls and the fag of washing their backs just to brighten things up a bit, so these 'dancing partners,' as they styled themselves, were grinningly accepted as part of the fun. They would sit in a bunch together – just like the 6d. a dance partners at the London dance halls – and wouldn't even take a smoke for letting army-booted novices tread on their slippers.

But – and here I must try to be tactful – there are some queer people in this world, and perhaps one or two oddities whom fate landed in a prison camp did not become less odd behind the wire.

Shall we say, then, that a few individuals

showed a bit too much aptitude for female impersonation, and that their readiness to slip into frocks was not entirely due to a sense of humour. Though their features might fit them for pantomime dames, they did not, it appeared, dress up to be laughed at.

'Careful, Cobber, your wig's squiffy' grinned a Kiwi to one of them – and was rewarded with a stare of such icy disdain that he might have insulted a Duchess.

Well, Kriegies are all for freedom, of course, and eccentrics are apt to be popular in a drab existence. But all tolerance was quickly strained with these few queer cards.

No doubt 'The Fishmonger's Wife,' 'Bag O' Bones' and 'The Passionate Pig' were misunderstood. No doubt the tales about them were as phoney as they were funny. But no doubt, too, these stories had to stop.

Who could blame the normal impersonators if they thought twice about dressing up for the next club concert? Who could feel comfortable at the thought of Huns discovering these oddities?

No one in his right senses. So Stalag opinion and 'the powers that be' called a halt. Female impersonations were confined to the stage, and the *partners* reluctantly resumed their trousers.

The dances, of course, went on, and for many moons to come were a feature of the camp. They gave pleasure and exercise to hundreds. They fought valiantly against barbed wire blues, and when they eventually closed down, through loss of the hall, they were very badly missed.



Heil, Churchill!

Just Jerries

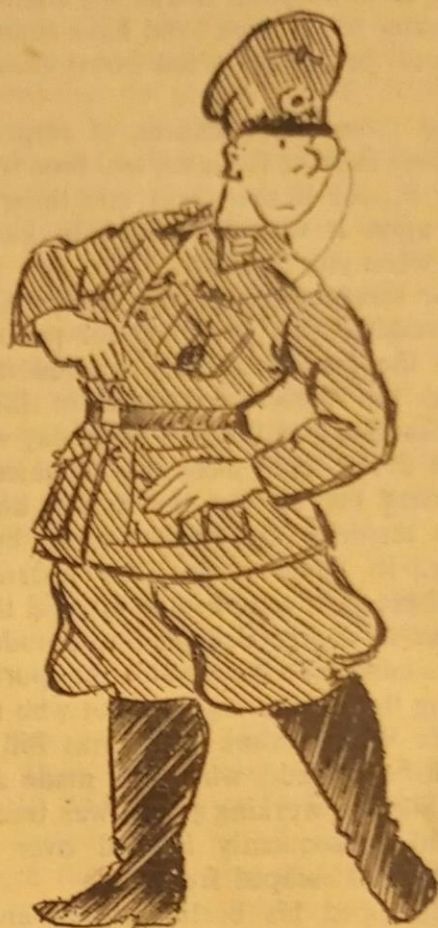
SAID a rare bird, a wise-cracking German censor: 'This is a queer gaol, this Hohenfels. The French walk about as though they own the place. We Germans like to think that *we* own it. And the British don't give a damn *who* owns it. They just run it how they like – and *patronize* everybody!'

Now that was a pretty bright remark for a Jerry and fair testimony to the fact that we weren't exactly squirming under the Hun jack-boot. It sheds a ray of light on a very common question – a question put to every one-time prisoner: 'How did the Germans really treat you?'

And the only fair answer I can give to that is that at Stalag 383 they treated us a lot better than we treated them. For though many of our guards assumed the status of attendants at a holiday camp, and came in very useful for shopping chores or for fielding cricket balls knocked through the wire, they were not always treated with respect. They were subjected, in fact, to severe mental cruelty.

Take the chain gang attendants, for instance. I have described elsewhere how they would come round the huts with armfuls of handcuffs which they would be told to sling on the beds while they showed us what they had to sell. Well, every so often, some hapless Hermann would fail to produce even saccharines for sale, but would still have an urge for a smoke. Then, woe betide him! The British would demand their pound of flesh. Before a single smoke was handed over, the Hun would have to click his heels, raise his arm and, with *Wehrmacht* smartness, 'HEIL CHURCHILL' – nor must he mutter reservations.

So loyal to the Fuehrer were some Nazis that they would only 'HEIL CHURCHILL' for English cigarettes and would preserve a proud, soldierly silence if offered others. And so harsh were some prisoners, that for anything less than a heartfelt 'HEIL' they would hand out naught but roll-ups. It was a pretty hard world for the Huns.



But the fact was we didn't really like them. They were civil enough at Hohenfels as a rule, and they provided laughs in plenty. But most of us were not to be imposed upon. We knew too much about the Huns of other days. There were too many witnesses to their habits when 'on top' – and these habits had not been endearing.

They were at their nastiest in 1940. At least, the captured B.E.F. men said so, and the rest of us could well believe that Nazi boots and rifle butts were then more in evidence than smiles and saccharines.

The early British prisoners were unfortunate. Many months went by before Red Cross or clothing parcels reached them, and winter found them in regions like Silesia and Poland, working outdoors in their threadbare uniforms, or forced down the mines on inadequate rations. Frostbite, hunger, lice and dysentery were their minor miseries compared with the lack of news from home and the black prospects of the war, and the best stroke of luck a prisoner could hope for was an accident serious enough to give

him a spell in hospital. It was not unknown for a youngster to 'go sick' and have sound teeth pulled out, just to get a few hours break from work.

Under these circumstances, it surprised no one to hear that the Germans had been tough on the B.E.F., for if there was one thing we all agreed upon it was that the Hun kicks you hardest when you're down.

Only a scrap of paper – the Geneva Convention – promised just treatment for prisoners of war, so the Nazis naturally ignored it. They provided the barest necessities of life – and sometimes less; they forced a seven day working week on ill-fed, unfit men; they threatened life enslavement for all but the docile; and they tried to terrorize the bolder spirits by plain brutality. In some camps, for instance, recaptured escapees were beaten up, and the little Himmlers in charge delighted to parade other prisoners and make them watch the sport.

Among the men in my own hut who remembered the victory-drunk Nazis was Bill Welch of the Rifle Brigade, who once made a break from a Silesian working party, was tracked by dogs and subsequently handed over to the guards he had escaped from.

Bill described his beating up in an extraordinarily detached manner, being more concerned to show us how he had protected his head from boots than to moan about his suffering elsewhere; but though the rest of us just chuckled, and told Bill that he hadn't protected his head as well as he thought, we didn't really think it funny that a fellow should be knocked down in cold blood and then kicked and rifle-butted to the orders of an officer, though we agreed that it was better than being 'shot while trying to escape.'

Shooting incidents always made us cynical, no matter how reasonably they were explained or how impressive a funeral the Germans gave the victim. I have mentioned elsewhere how the two young prisoners who were shot on a working party had neglected some wise advice from a Scot. I should add as a sequel to that episode that the same Scot was himself shot dead at another camp.

The story to reach us was that Jock had gone 'Stalag crazy' and had tried to scale the barbed wire fences in broad daylight, so that the watching guards had 'simply done their job' in

shooting him. But we, his friends at Hohenfels, were not convinced that they had done anything other than a safe murder. If Jock had suddenly taken leave of his senses, why, we asked each other, couldn't the guards have overpowered him, instead of killing him on the spot? And we answered that question ourselves – Simply because they were Huns.

But, as regards the early prisoners, it was not so much the ruthlessness of the Germans that embittered the B.E.F. as their arrogance, boastfulness and insufferable cocksureness over the complete collapse of England. In particular was the unconcealed gloating of civilians hard to stomach, though their attitude varied greatly in different districts.

'The civvies used to crow till it made you sick!' said a guardsman who had worked in Prussia. 'They'd rub it in about Norway and Dunkirk . . . They'd ask you what regiment you were in – and then grin at the way you marched in clogs . . . They'd find out you came from Liverpool – and tell you the Luftwaffe had wiped it out . . . They'd nudge each other as they asked you who was going to win the war – but when you told 'em they'd get nasty. Soon they'd be shouting and screaming and shaking their fists like so many blarsted Hitlers. Prussians are all alike, Chum: pure-bred, double-dyed bastards!'

What the guardsman meant was that Prussians are unlovable types, and if he was looking for an argument about it he didn't get one from me, for I'd noticed the same fact myself. Indeed, everybody noticed it including most other Germans, some of whom tried to make the Prussian pig an alibi for all the misdeeds of Hitler's Reich.

The first specimens I saw myself were the guards who met our prison ship from Crete at the port of Salonika. In the main they were big, awkward-looking fellows and there was a marked percentage of buck-teethed, thick-spectacled types amongst them. They seemed to be in extreme awe of their N.C.O.s, who were often of the small, cold-eyed, thin-lipped breed who delight in their own fanatical nastiness and have Himmler – that 'cross between a pig and a wasp' as a Yank described him – as their pin-up boy.

As they marched our column of ragged, half-famished Aussies, Kiwis and Englishmen

through the main streets of Salonika, these guards kept up continuous pointless shouts of 'Raus . . . Raus . . . !' accompanied by such a display of menacing bayonets and malevolent scowls that it seemed they might stage a massacre at any moment. If this was intended to dispirit us it was a bit superfluous, for any signs of perkiness we exhibited were entirely *ersatz* and intended only for the benefit of the Greek population who, grand people that they are, were giving us the same friendly smiles and victory signs as they did before Britain failed to save their country and Crete.

It was as we were passing a smart café in a main street that the Prussian showed his nature. A lovely Greek girl – she looked about seventeen – stepped impulsively forward and, with a quick 'Good luck,' gave some cigarettes to Frank Felix, who was marching by my side. Instantly, the nearest Huns reacted. Shouting like maniacs, they rushed up, grabbed her round the neck, swung her completely off her feet and pummelled and punched her towards an officer, who screamed at her as though she had just attempted the Fuehrer's life. Finally, the frail, terrified girl was pushed, weeping, into the rear ranks of the column and made to march with the prisoners all the way to the transit-camp.

This rather sickening scene was repeated several times along the route, and by the time we had reached the gates of the transit camp there were a number of Greek girls and women in the column, including a grandmotherly old soul who had thrown a melon to the prisoners. They were all herded into a guardroom, from which we saw more Greek girls emerge weeping as we entered the compound.

Nor were children safe from brutality. We found that a Hun would rifle-butt a cheeky boy as lightly as a normal man would wag a finger at him, while an episode which particularly sickened Bill Spink concerned a little Greek girl of six or seven.

Bill, with other prisoners, was doing a forced fatigue in some stables when the child, whose mother had given her a piece of bread for the Englishmen, came running towards him. He tried to wave her back. Too late. A Hun guard saw her and seized a whip. As the child ran past him he cut her legs from under her with the lash. There were scores of ugly incidents like

that, and they left more bitter memories than the many wanton shootings of prisoners.

It was an understood thing which nobody questioned that the guards at that transit camp were out to kill if they got the chance. The Serbs who were there before us begged us to keep yards inside even the warning wire limits allowed by the Huns. Otherwise, they said, the watch-tower sentries would shoot on the pretext that we were *just about* to infringe the wire, and British bodies would be left as a warning on the parade ground, just as Yugo-Slav bodies had been lying there when we first arrived.

Fair enough! We all agreed that this filthy hole with its rats, lice, fleas, bugs and mosquitoes would be the last place one would choose to be seen dead in, so while we could live on the rations (a cup of horse-lights soup, a few ounces of green-mouldy bread and three-quarters of an Italian army biscuit per day), we determined to give the guards no excuse for murder.

But they found one. The middle of a quiet August night was the time chosen by a guard for an act which was as foul and Hunnish as any I remember. He tossed a stick-bomb into a barrack full of sleeping prisoners, giving no sort of warning before and no sane reason after.

We in the next barrack, a few yards away, heard the explosion of the bomb, the screams of the wounded and the hoarse shouts of sentries. That was all. We could only stare sullenly at the Hun Kommandant who asked us next morning whether any of us had actually *seen* what had happened. He seemed uncomfortable and his manner was half apologetic. He inferred that the guard had seen, or fancied he had seen, some suspicious movement and he advised us to lie quite still at night to avoid danger.

As we were moved to Germany soon after that incident we never heard for sure what deaths and mutilations were caused by the bomb, but we did know that British officers in charge of the hospital were pressing for an inquiry, and we could well understand the Kommandant's uneasiness. Supposing Germany should lose the war?

Not that there seemed the least likelihood of that to the average German in August '41. The victories of Greece and Crete and the flying start on the Eastern Front had whipped up

confidence to its height – as we noticed on our rail journey to the Reich.

During eight endless days in the tight-packed horse-boxes we stood in turn at the tiny grating, breathed a little air, and then reported to the others what we could see outside. Most men were too down with dysentery or too frantic with lice to care about the scenery, but once over the Yugo-Slav border into Austria there was eagerness to see the actual Reich and to try and judge the spirit of the people.

Nazi flags and bunting were everywhere – and meant nothing. But the jubilation of the people at windows, on platforms and at stations where the train stopped was unmistakable. The women, in particular, seemed far from war weary. They waved handkerchiefs, blew kisses and shouted greeting to our guards as though troop trains were a novelty in a really lovely war.

Silly as it looked to see children 'Heil Hitler' and shake hands with each other; laughable as was the bumptious bearing of station masters, the unconscious strutting of old men and the self-conscious swaggering of the Hitler Youth; it all served to give us this impression: that the Germans felt on top of the world and liked to show it. We wondered how the guards at our first Stalag would behave, and whether they would be an improvement on the Huns in Greece.

Well they certainly were that, those Lamsdorf Germans, and for this we had to thank the early prisoners. These men, by sheer cheerfulness of spirit and by constant fighting for their rights, had made the Huns respect them. Indeed, now that they were properly clothed from England, now that they were fit on Red Cross food, and now that they were more serene in mind, they roused a sort of envy in the Huns. Even 'Powder Puff' could not subdue their spirits – though to give the clown his due he did his best.

Powder Puff was the *Strafe* officer. It was his job to maintain discipline, keep the prisoners down, keep the bunker full and put the fear of Hitler into everyone. A corsetted, powdered puppet of a man, with some sort of facial paralysis that gave him the fixed smile of a ventriloquist's doll, he rode about the Stalag on a bike, shouting threats, finding fault, calling prisoners to attention and imposing mass sanctions on whole compounds.

His chief ambition was to make things so unpleasant for the non-working N.C.O.s that

they would volunteer for jobs outside, and one of his brainwaves was to stage drill parades for four hours a day, these parades to consist of such dreary marching in a small space that they would drive men to ask for work instead.

The brainwave was a flop. It drove no N.C.O.s to work, but it nearly drove the guards frantic trying to round up the marchers from the barrack rooms.

Immediately the 'fall in for drill' was sounded, the thousand or so men in the non-working compound would dwindle by hundreds. Men would flatten themselves under mattresses on the top bunks, dive through windows from one barrack room to another as the guards entered, slip in and out of latrines, produce phoney chits excusing them from marching, pretend that they were booked for barrack fatigues, form 'sick parties' for the M.I. room – and so mess the Huns about generally that they would end by swearing helplessly and making do with half the number of marchers they had been ordered to collect.

Once on the actual marching ground, the Kriegies would drill as though they liked it, but as soon as there was the smallest break, or as soon as the column passed anywhere near a latrine or barrack-room, the numbers would mysteriously diminish, which phenomena so infuriated Powder Puff that he once rushed fuming into a latrine, firing a pistol wildly through the roof and sides and making the occupants dive hurriedly in all directions.

Like many Germans, Powder Puff was a perfect stooge, for he had huge vanity, no dignity and a vile temper. Never will I forget one joyful day when he was cycling about doing his usual nuisance act of making everyone salute him. Some unknown hero waited till he had pedalled safely past and then saluted with a 'raspberry,' whereupon Powder Puff swivelled his neck round, jammed on his brakes and, to the Kriegies' huge delight, went 'rear over tip' over the handlebars. Needless to say, he did all the fist-shakings, screamings and pistol-fumblings necessary to increase our joy, and the greatest proof of his clown's success was that he made even 'Chisel' laugh.

This latter Hun – Hempel, I think, was his real name – had features so long, sharp and steely that it only needed someone to suggest that his mother had been 'frightened by a

chisel' for the name to stick. He was not an officer like Powder Puff, but he had risen to some sort of N.C.O. rank by his natural talent for snooping, and was a tireless, though not always successful, enforcer of Stalag anti-prisoner orders.

There were dozens of these at Lamsdorf—petty and senseless rules, endlessly thought out to cramp our style. As though it were not cheerless enough to be shut up in winter in icy barrack-rooms where only those few nearest the light bulbs could see properly, there were orders against smoking, against making lamps to read by, and even against sitting down, for though the Huns admitted that there were only forms enough to seat a fifth of each barrack-room, they laid it down that bunks were only to be used at night.

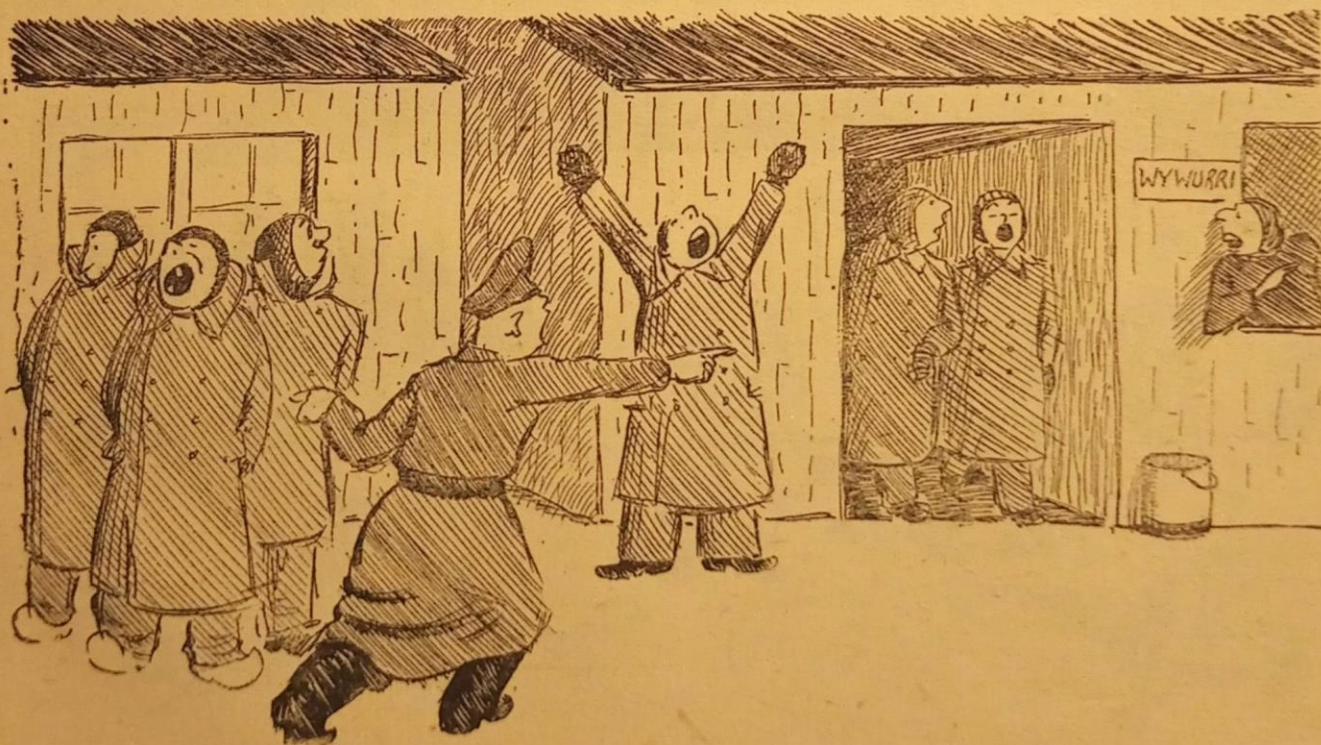
There were rules against putting up washing lines, hanging up clothes, pinning up photographs, storing kit by beds and scores of other things which were quite harmless, and if ever a barrack-room showed signs of settling down despite these pinpricks, then it was a safe bet that the occupants would suddenly be shifted to another barrack.

But what irked prisoners most were the 'anti-eating' orders. The Huns made no effort to feed us properly themselves, but they did all

they could to mar our Red Cross cooking. Not content with puncturing all tins in parcels and issuing the parcels in dribs and drabs so that a fellow never knew where he stood, they provided utterly inadequate fuel for equally inadequate ovens, and made it a crime to use home-made cookers of our own. When my own party arrived at Lamsdorf, for instance, there was no fuel issued at all in the reception barracks, and fellows were eating cocoa and pancake powder on spoons in default of means of cooking it.

Naturally, no true Kriegie would leave a meal uncooked while there was any wood about, so as soon as newcomers discovered bedboards under the palliasses they just burnt them and let their night's sleep take care of itself. Similarly, even the old hands had to burn bedboards—though they seldom made the mistake of burning their own—and it became such a common practice that the Huns called it 'Sabotage,' fixed a penalty of twenty-one days in the bunker for a first offence, and employed a host of snoops to trap offenders.

Chief of these was Chisel, and he kicked over more fires, ruined more meals and arrested more cooks than all the pests in Lamsdorf. Still, he gave us many laughs, as on the night he grabbed a dixie handle sticking out of a stove and found, too late, that it had been



heated white-hot by his Kriegie friends; or as on the night when he climbed snoopily through the barrack window, only to land in a great tub of liquid specially moved from the night latrine for his benefit. His language as he went squelching up the room in his jackboots was said to have been shocking by those who understood German, but he never was a gentleman anyway.

As a contrast to Chisel, honourable mention should be made of 'Smiler,' a posten with anti-war views who had once been imprisoned by the Nazis. Smiler was as fine a little fellow as you could meet anywhere, cheerful, friendly and always willing to help the prisoners, even to his own grave risk. He did much to modify the views of those who tarred all Germans with the same Nazi brush, and wherever he is now I hope that he is getting as square a deal as he once gave us.

No doubt there were other good Germans at Lamsdorf, and certainly there were some so dumb by nature that one could not dislike them; but on the whole they were a morose, humourless crew, who took such pains to be unpleasant that it was cruel of Kriegies not to show they noticed.

As for the 'Stalag Watch'—the special security guards who patrolled the fences and the roads by night—they looked just what they

were: a bunch of would-be killers, always seeking for the least excuse to shoot, and sometimes making one where none existed.

Over and above the normal roll calls, the 'Stalag Watch' staged special check parades. Several times a week, especially in the depths of winter, the prisoners would be turned out of their barracks at the crack of dawn and, breakfastless and freezing, would stand for hours on end waiting for the count to even start.

The delay, of course, was simply due to malice, but however the Kriegies were cursing in their hearts, they invariably raised grins and cheers to greet the guards, for it was both pride and policy with British prisoners not to let the Huns see them 'down.'

If that policy, tested out at Lamsdorf, was specially triumphant at Hohenfels, it was due in no small measure to the fact that Stalag 383 was not opened till September '42, and was then filled by N.C.O.s from Lamsdorf, Thorn, Spittal, Marienburg and Marburg camps who, between them, knew the Germans pretty well.

Right from the start they refused to think of Hohenfels as the *Strafe* camp it was meant to be. Right from the start they treated the Huns as semi-comic characters. And right from the start they ran their daily lives themselves.

And it's time I said a little more about them.

Life of Leisure

JUDGING from the prisoners' mail from home, the question that most intrigued their friends was—how did they pass the time away? Granted that they did no work; granted that wine and women were denied them and that song was just a trifle out of place, how did they spend their daily lives? How did they manage to keep sane?

Well some, of course, just didn't. I would cheerfully have certified my hutmates, and they would willingly have certified me. We were all 'Stalag Happy' in a way, but it was only late arrivals who were worried by it. 'If you chaps are sane,' said an Arnheim man, 'you've got a shock coming. Back in Blighty they're as mad as hatters... don't even mutter to themselves all day!'

Even Jerries noticed we were queer, especially one lovely week in August when the sun was rather fierce, 'Crazy Week,' we called it later, and it all began, I think, with a Kriegie and a kite.

He had made this kite himself and was testing it on the Sports Field one afternoon when he saw a Jerry guard gaping blankly through the



wire. The Hun's expression seemed to say: 'What... a grown-up man with a kite!' so the Kriegie and a friend put an act on, just to make him stare a little more. They started squabbling like children over the kite, got it entangled in the wire, set up howls of anguish and, finally, one kicked the other on the shin, who promptly sat down, screwed his face up and started bawling.

The Hun's mouth opened like a cellar and off he went to fetch a witness. While he was reporting that the Englanders were mad, other clowns joined in the act and presently there were Kriegies playing 'Ring-a-ring-of-roses,' making daisy chains and so on—just for the sight of Hun reaction. This varied from dumb amazement to



suspicious scowls, but was so satisfactory on the whole that the next few days saw all the clowns in camp working overtime. They embarked on a full scale 'Crazy Week' directed at the Hun.

There were greatcoated Napoleons gazing darkly through the wire, cocked-hatted Nelsons peering up through telescopes, bands of painted Indians whooping through the roads, men riding invisible bikes, leading imaginary dogs, playing marbles, marching to a Chinese band, staring in bunches at the watch-towers - doing anything, in fact, to get the Huns bewildered. In the sweltering heat, fellows would come on parade in coats and balaclavas and stand shivering next to others dressed in handkerchiefs. There were idiocies galore - and to crown them was the 'train.'

The train got the Jerries really ga-ga. It consisted of a short row of huts near the fence - and much imagination. It left for England twice a day at times announced throughout the camp, and passengers were warned to be on time and have their tickets ready. Whistles would blow in the Stalag, men would grasp suitcases and kit-bags and rush from all parts of the camp, giving up their tickets at the barrier and crowding into compartments where they could get a seat at the window. Once inside, they would crane their necks out, smoke would belch from the funnel, late arrivals would dash desperately through the barrier, urged on by guard and porters, and, finally, the waving of a red flag would close the platform. As the train steamed out for Blighty, there would be wavings and counter-wavings from passengers and friends, last messages would be bawled out frantically and, as the guard announced the time of the next train, the crowd would disperse to their huts, leaving the extra Jerries in the watch-towers to work things out.

Mad, quite mad, of course, but none who saw the Jerries' faces could esteem it waste of time. For sheer concentrated stupidity, for utter and complete bewilderment, for dark, scowling suspiciousness - nothing could approach the Huns' expressions. The only thing they never did was laugh.

Eventually - after Staff talks in Berlin - the Kommandant sent for MacKenzie. The prisoners he said, were acting strangely: in fact, he thought that some were going mental. What did MacKenzie think himself?

Mac cashed in beautifully. Undoubtedly there

was madness in the camp, he said, and certainly it was spreading fast. But who could expect otherwise? Thousands of men caged in like that and never a walk outside the wire. What about a few walking-out parties while the weather lasted? The Kommandant agreed. Anything was better than mass insanity, he thought. So a system of walks under parole was introduced, and the crazy, claiming this had proved there was method in their madness, decided to relax for a bit. It was rather a relief all round.

But a truce from craziness while I try to answer that natural question: what did the prisoners do all day?

Well, the closest analogy I can think of to our normal life is that of students at a rather frowzy university. If a man so wished, he could study all day, play sports in season, join clubs of every kind, hear music, read books, join a gym class, attend debates and even do a theatre on occasion. Almost every form of hobby could be practised from rug-making to bee-keeping, there was every facility for gambling, whether from the book-making or punting end, and there were not only tutors for all the normal school subjects but there were coaches for bookies and tic-tac men, which put us well ahead of even Oxford.

If a man would fence, skate, swim, dance, play golf or speak Bulgarian, he could either do so or learn to do so without hindrance, save for weather. If his taste ran to Chess and Bridge or Snap and Housie-Housie, to sailing model yachts or knitting balaclavas, to getting ruptures at the weight-lifting class or to learning how to treat them at the St. John Ambulance class - it made no difference. He would be fully catered for.

Quite apart from the business activities I have written of and the social clubs, debating society and theatres which are later dealt with; quite apart, too, from the underground activities against the Huns, which occupied many, and the cooking, cobbling, gardening and hairdressing jobs, which occupied more, there were such activities as pet keeping, spirit rapping, band practising and hooch making to pass the time away.

Then it was always possible to spend the whole day just collecting fuel, cooking meals, making brews and doing washing: indeed, experimenting in the cause of Science, some of us discovered that it was possible to just lie in bed and watch

others do these things, without feeling any great fatigue.

And even now I have not touched on the main occupation at Hohenfels, which was spreading rumours, waiting for the news, misinterpreting it and nattering endlessly about the prospects of the war. There were maps in every hut and pins to mark the fronts. There were calendars to mark off, notches to cut in bedposts and other ways to mark the passing days. We all had theories when the war would end and most of us had bets about the date. In this way I won from Sergt. Gilbert a complete recording of the 'Messiah' – and I still have hopes of getting it one day.

However, having indicated that we were not short of varied pastimes I had better say a bit about our only daily work: the task of being counted by the Huns.

Sometimes roll call was held on the Sports Field and sometimes just outside our huts, according to the state of the ground. In the latter case, it was something of a farce. Ten minutes or so after the 'fall in' had sounded, men in all stages of attire from pyjamas upwards would stroll on parade, decide that they couldn't hang about waiting for still later arrivals and would retire to their huts again, leaving the Jerry postens screaming, grinning or shoulder shrugging according to temperament.

It didn't make a lot of difference if there were a few short, because the normal Jerry couldn't count anyway, and if he was a bit doubtful about the numbers the British Company Commander would find out what numbers he expected, count the ranks himself and tell the Jerry it was all okay and would he mind not wasting further time.

When the escaping season was in full swing, roll calls were more elaborate and might last for hours; and in good weather, when parades were on the Sports Field and there were Hun officers to run them, the counting was pretty thorough. All the same, there were always many latecomers, and since the Huns couldn't stop defaulters by imposing bunker sentences, the Kriegies themselves took action. It was such a nuisance to Kriegies attending school classes etc. to be kept waiting for others, that sanctions were imposed on offenders and a latecomer might lose a job in the cookhouse, or be deprived of camp services and have to fetch his mail himself.

Considering the strict discipline in the German

Army, it was surprising how little of it they managed to impose on the Hohenfels prisoners. We would smoke and talk and move about while the count was going on and, as soon as it was over, make a mad dash for the Sports Field gate, the Jerry officers scuttling out of the way to avoid being killed in the rush. There were periods, of course, when they would try to get control by locking us in the Sports Field for a few hours, but, on the whole, the Hun attempts at discipline were laughable. It was a common comment amongst the Kriegies that though German prisoners in England would be immeasurably better fed and housed than we were, they would certainly not be allowed to make such stooges of their guards.

Just to show the Jerries how a parade should be staged, we occasionally put on a smart affair ourselves, Anzac Day and Armistice Day, for instance, making the Jerries rub their eyes at the pressed uniforms, shining boots, polished badges and stylish marching of the prisoners. There were some men who, right throughout their Stalag days, maintained a spic and span military appearance in all weathers; but most of us were more concerned with comfort, so that the summer saw men in shorts (often converted from underpants or from cut down battle trousers) and nothing else, while winter was a time for clogs, scarves, balaclavas and woollen skull caps, the latter made from multi-coloured socks. The effect, on parade, was not aesthetic.

A colourful touch was added to an extra roll call one evening by the appearance on the Sports Field of actors from the Stalag theatre – still in their stage get-up for 'George and Margaret,' which had been interrupted for the purpose of the roll call. Teddy Laws in skirts and a blonde wig was a bit of a distraction from the business of being counted, and there was even more skylarking than usual in the ranks, so the little Hun officer in charge of the parade got annoyed.

Drawing his revolver, he shouted for silence, got it for a second and then announced in English: 'Stop this noise at once – or I will shoot myself!' Whereupon there was a moment's pause, followed by roars of laughter, cries of encouragement and the final break-up of the parade while the Jerry was explaining that what he really meant to say was: 'Stop this noise – or I will shoot you myself.' He was a harmless little chap, that officer, and there was much Kriegie

sympathy for him when he made an indiscreet remark about the Nazis to his batman, was promptly reported and was sent away to jail.

His successor was a big, bull-necked Hun, who tried, for a time, to throw his weight about. One summer's day an England-Australia Test Match had been arranged on the Sports Field and great pains had been taken to rope off the carefully prepared cricket pitch. Observing that everybody else was walking round the ropes, this Hun climbed over them and walked across the wicket. Immediately, howls of wrath and execration arose from the Kriegies and shook him to his jackboots. Recovering his dignity, he stalked up to our interpreter and demanded to know the meaning of that English expression he had just heard shouted. He was told that 'stupid bastard' was good English, and meant somebody who walked across cricket pitches instead of round them. He had to be content with that, though we all hoped he bought himself a dictionary.

Cricket, by the way, aroused mild interest in the Germans, and civilians outside the wire would pause to watch the net practice (the nets being made with string from Red Cross parcels) on the Sports Field. Football and boxing, however, were what the guards liked watching and some of them were really eager fans.

Such matches as England versus Scotland at soccer always drew Jerries as spectators, and those who had a grandstand view from the nearest watch-towers were envied by the others.



This match was staged in style and was always preceded by the Scots being piped on the field by kilted pipers. The standard of football in this, and in the league football between company teams, was pretty high, but matches were limited to half an hour each half, since Stalag rations did not make for stamina.

As for the gruelling rugby matches – in which the Welsh and New Zealand lads excelled – and the boxing and wrestling tournaments which were staged by the 'Four Posts Club' – some men said they couldn't even watch them on the food at Hohenfels.

Certainly they were heroes those boxing lads, who, with no more rations than the rest of us, would train for weeks on end and then stand up and hammer hell out of each other for the sheer joy of combat. They had no greater admirer than the German Kommandant, who always had a seat at the ringside and seemed astonished at the cheerful way in which hidings were taken and given. The ordinary Jerry postens were keen fans, too, and one, at least, postponed his leave so as not to miss a famous fight between Sam Scrivens and Jock MacKenna. Very popular with all were the all-in wrestling bouts between Terry Daler and Snowy Wright, both of whom had had professional experience – though not on the same scale of training diet.

Duggie Thwaites of Australia, a wrestling champion at his weight, not only taught many men the rudiments of wrestling, but he conducted a weight-lifting class which, in some complicated manner, carried on a competition with a Sydney class – and beat them! Weight for weight, the Stalag men lifted more than their rivals, but though this result was hailed with enthusiasm at Hohenfels it no doubt encouraged the over-exuberance of some gym enthusiasts who discovered, in hospital, that they had not been quite so proof against strain as they had thought.

Under the supervision of Duggie, Jimmy Seed, the gym expert, or other experienced men, it was possible to reach a pitch of fitness safely enough, but lone wolves who liked to train themselves were apt to overdo it and tax their constitutions. Bones seemed more brittle than in normal life and broken limbs took a greater time to knit, while a common ankle sprain might keep a fellow hobbling for weeks on end.

Despite little drawbacks like these, every type of sport imaginable was staged in the Stalag, a

static water tank being used for water polo and swimming and an ice rink being made in winter by hosing and freezing the basket ball pitch. Skates, like nearly everything else, were provided by the Red Cross.

'Sporting' equipment not provided by the Red Cross, but obtained in some mystic manner which escapes me, were the heads and tails dice used in the most popular of all Stalag gambling games - 'Two-up.' This game was introduced by the Aussies, and on fine days the whole of the main square of the camp seemed devoted to it, while in bad weather or at night there were one or two huts open to the public as 'Two-up' gambling hells.

It was a simple and fascinating game to watch and Jerries used to gasp at the ease and speed with which huge fortunes were won and lost - the fortunes, of course, being staked in cigarettes, not money. Originally the game was played by tossing two pennies and betting whether two heads or two tails or one of each would result from the spin. Later, dice rolled on a table superseded the pennies game, but the principal was still the same and the same reports would spread round the camp that Diamond Jim, the Maori, had already thrown fifteen heads in a row, had already won umpteen thousand cigs and was now prepared to stake the whole lot that he threw the sixteenth pair of heads next throw.

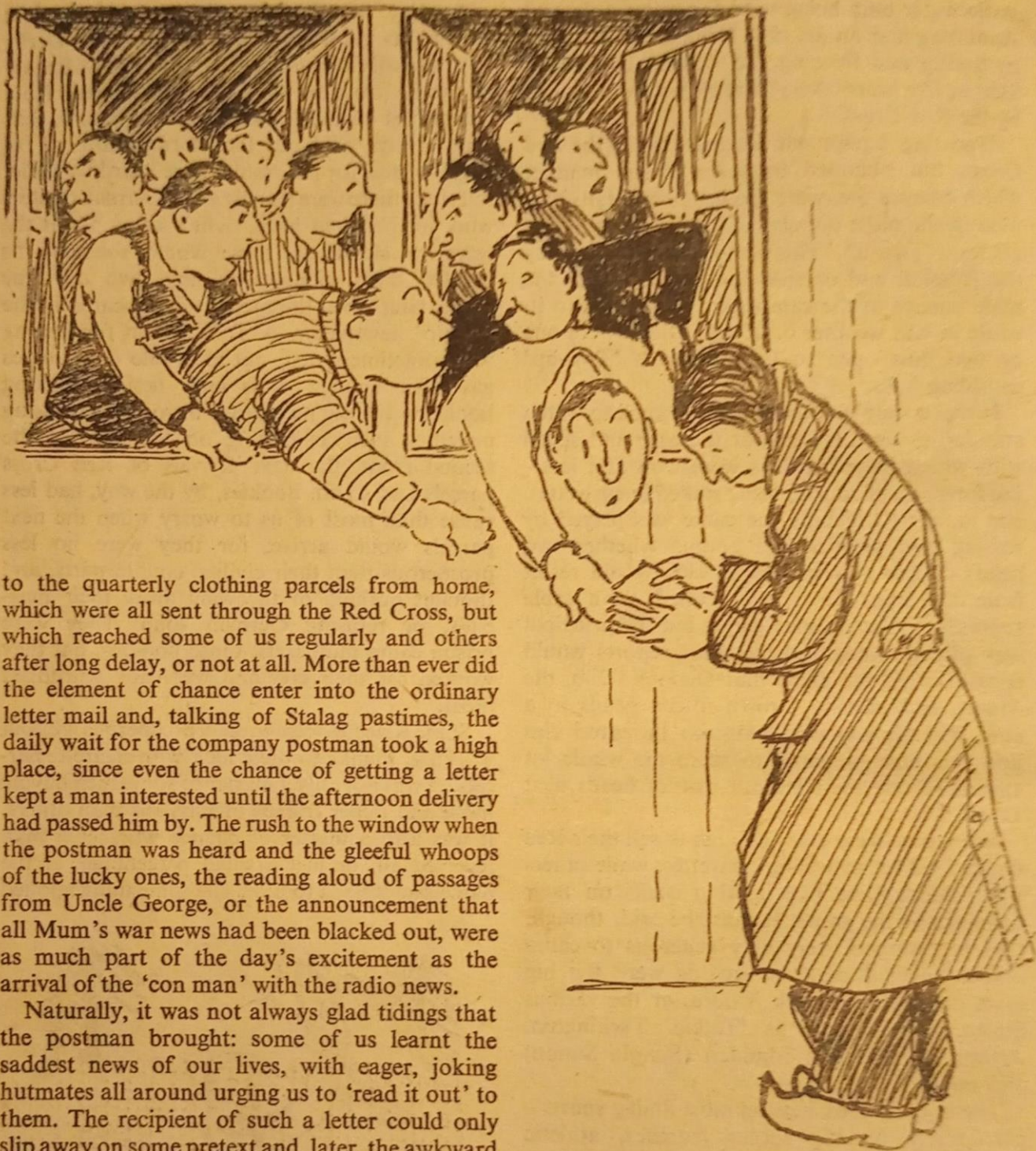
Some men were crazy enough to sell their Red Cross food for gambling cigarettes, while others were able to live like fighting cocks on their winnings at the game. It must be said, though, that big winners were very generous to camp funds, hospital patients, &c., as were the big mart owners like, Mick Moore, or the various Stalag bookies such as 'Talkie' Turkington, Arthur Bennet, Tim Madden (Simple Simon) and others.

The bookies took bets on most Stalag sports - particularly on big soccer matches, athletic meetings and boxing tournaments - and on all the classic race events in England. They erected big, brightly postered stands in the open air usually announcing that they were connected with such and such an established English Firm and sometimes claiming to have representatives in 'all the best Stalags in Deutschland,' though what advantage that gave punters was difficult to see.

Anyway, the bookies were a cheerful sight and it was good to be able to back the Derby loser as easily at Hohenfels as you could at Epsom and to be provided with all the latest news from the stables on the bookies' bulletin board. Bets were always paid out the morning after a big English race, for the results were heard by radio, but since there were usually a few German punters who, in theory at least, didn't know about the secret wireless sets, these would solemnly be handed their winnings, if any, two or three weeks later when the race result appeared in the 'Camp' newspaper. A Tote system for betting was sometimes tried, but as a rule the bookies gave fair enough odds and, besides making books on the big races, they introduced pleasing novelties such as betting on the date of the second front, the next arrivals of Red Cross parcels and so on. Bookies, by the way, had less cause than most of us to worry when the next parcels would arrive, for they were no less prosperous than their civilian counterparts, and thought nothing of throwing away their butt-ends, or refusing German soup. They were prison camp plutocrats, those bookies, but they worked for their cigs and were not begrudged them.

Some Kriegies were equally prosperous without working, thanks to their luck with cigarette parcels. It was not only a matter of some men having more and richer friends in England than others, it was also a matter of chance whether a man received all, or just a small percentage, of the parcels addressed to him. The same thing applied





to the quarterly clothing parcels from home, which were all sent through the Red Cross, but which reached some of us regularly and others after long delay, or not at all. More than ever did the element of chance enter into the ordinary letter mail and, talking of Stalag pastimes, the daily wait for the company postman took a high place, since even the chance of getting a letter kept a man interested until the afternoon delivery had passed him by. The rush to the window when the postman was heard and the gleeful whoops of the lucky ones, the reading aloud of passages from Uncle George, or the announcement that all Mum's war news had been blacked out, were as much part of the day's excitement as the arrival of the 'con man' with the radio news.

Naturally, it was not always glad tidings that the postman brought: some of us learnt the saddest news of our lives, with eager, joking hutmates all around urging us to 'read it out' to them. The recipient of such a letter could only slip away on some pretext and, later, the awkward tactfulness of his friends would show him that he had not kept his secret. On such occasions, that complete lack of privacy which is the curse of Stalag life was a very great ordeal. Nowhere was it possible to be alone: even to think in peace was hardly possible, for unless a man were reading or asleep his silence would be bound to bring forth wisecracks. It was certainly no life for a recluse.

However, under normal circumstances and for the normal gregarious male, it was the communal nature of the life that was its greatest recompense, and the wise man made the best of it by keeping his interest in as many spheres of camp activity as possible. To help in this, there were occasional issues of Stalag magazines and a number of wall newspapers produced weekly.

The Main Square was considerably brightened by Jack Lindsay's 'Spectator,' illustrated with delightfully topical cartoons by Jim Welch, by a Kiwi newspaper with Bob Sweet as staff artist, by the bright newsy journal of the London Club and by a large number of posters advertising various social functions and sports events.

Just round the corner was an Aussie news sheet which once pulled off the biggest scoop in Stalag history. It printed an interview with Mr. Eric Berg in which he gave the first news of the then proposed repatriation scheme for prisoners of war. The camp was wild with excitement at the news, and the fact that the whole scheme later fell through did not detract from the brilliance of the original scoop. For days on end there were big crowds of Kriegies clustered round the paper, and if six thousand of them read the story there were six thousand different versions of it argued about later. Complete issues of that wall newspaper were bound for presentation to an Australian War Museum.

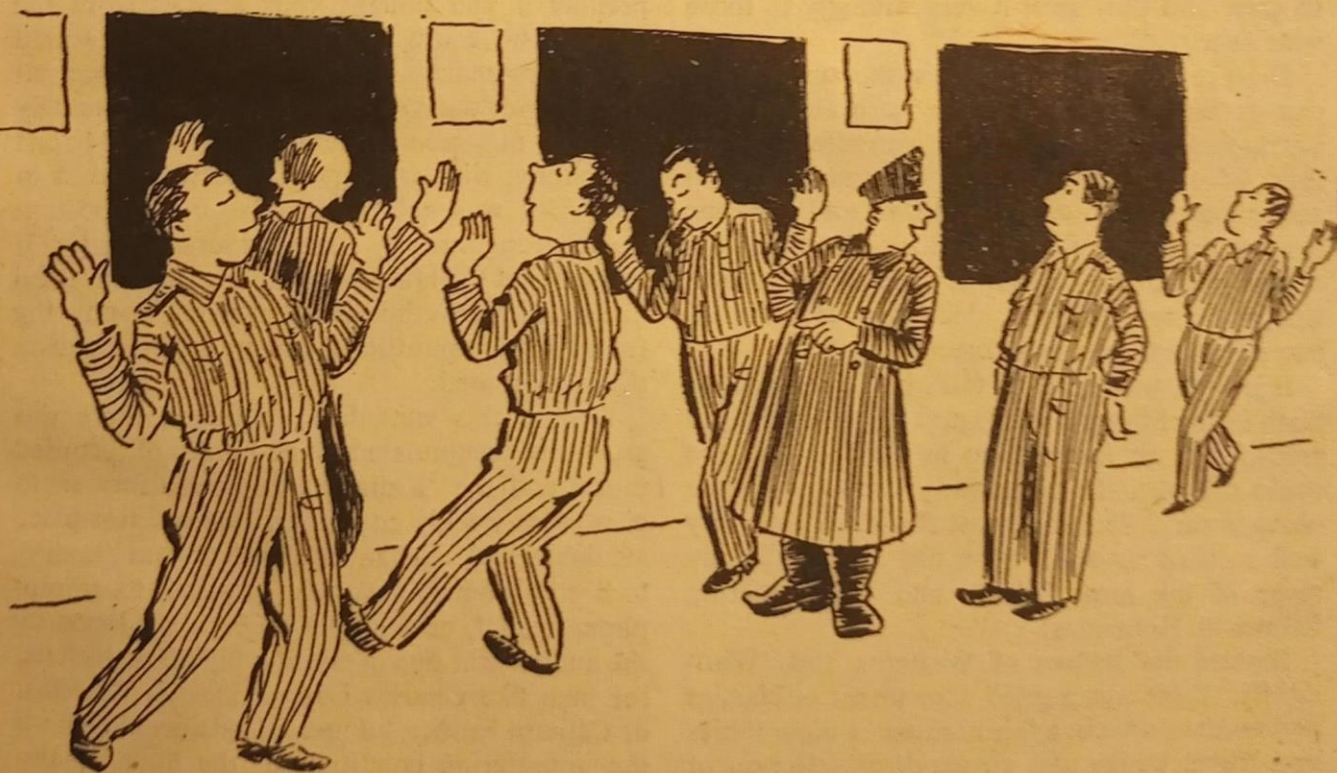
A Stalag incident that produced bright efforts from wall cartoonists was the departure of the 'Irish' prisoners from Hohenfels. Oddly imagining that Irishmen in the British Army could be seduced by Nazi propaganda, the Huns decided to put them all together in a camp where they would be better treated than other Kriegies. To

this end, all the Irish at Hohenfels were told to pack their kits, and the morning came when they were to leave the camp in a party.

Those who turned up to see them off had the laugh of a lifetime. There were Palestinians in the party, there were Scots, Cypriots, Aussies, Kiwis, Taffies and Englishmen; every type and nationality in the camp, in fact – except Irishmen. The Paddies had exchanged identities with anyone who felt like a change, had provided the Cypriots with a few green favours and had taught Palestinians to sing 'Killarney.' The Stalag band played an Irish jig, the gates opened wide and the United Nations were off, cheered on their way by the Irish in the camp.

The laugh was on the Jerries that time; but now and then they scored themselves – especially that wisecracking censor I have mentioned earlier. He popped his head into K.2. one afternoon when a dancing class for novices was in progress. The Kriegies were being taught to walk dance-fashion, and were gingerly sliding one boot after another round the hall, with their hands above their heads to learn good balance.

'What's this?' jibed the censor, 'another Dunkirk, Ja?' And since there was no come-back from the dancers, save some sheepish grins, the crack was acknowledged to be 'one up for Jerry.'



A little later, though, the same Jerry was backstage in the theatre watching the make-up man working on an actor. 'Think you could make me up to look like an Englishman?' he asked brightly. 'Sorry, Chum,' said the Kriegie, 'but I'm a make-up man - not a plastic surgeon!' So that was quits with the censor.

In exchanging yarns like that and in general Stalag gossip, some Kriegies passed the hours away. A man could go from hut to hut, calling on his friends, giving them the latest camp rumours and picking up fresh griff for his own room-mates. If he was out to learn things, though, he could call on men of every type of experience in every part of the world and find that they were mostly glad to talk.

He could hear about the French Foreign Legion from Spaniards who had deserted from it to join the Allies. He could learn about the Kaiser's old army from a Palestinian ex-German who had won the Iron Cross in the previous war and had fought against the Reich in this. He could chat to a tea planter from Ceylon, sheep farmers from Australia, a gold prospector or a radio announcer from Canada, policemen from South Africa, New Guinea or the Old Kent Road, and a host of diverse characters representing every walk of life from Peer's son to pavement artist. All these men had information to give, and they gave it very willingly to those who asked.

Even the most taciturn types were apt to open out in Stalag life and some were almost embarrassingly frank about their own affairs. Small talk of the type that passes among casual acquaintances was soon exhausted, and once one man revealed the facts about his marriage, say, others would outvie him in candid revelations. But not your husband, Madam. He was an exception and was as discreet as you are.

If a man was tired of talk, had no smalls to wash in the Stalag laundry and found nothing to amuse him on the Square or Sports Field, he could still pass the time away browsing in the camp library. This was most efficiently run, very well stocked as time went on, and staffed by some of the most helpful and long suffering fellows at Hohenfels.

Besides the shelves of Westerns and 'Whodunits,' there was a good assortment of classics and modern novels, a fair number of biographies and travel books and an excellent selection of

technical books sent through the Red Cross. There were also a number of mid-Victorian romances - many of which had been well thumbed by prisoners in the last war - and a few eighteenth Century editions of works by Voltaire, which may or may not have been of money value.

Considering the lighthearted views on property held by many Kriegies, it was surprising how few of the books were actually 'won,' but it was also surprising how many borrowers would keep a book for weeks on end, and then tell the 'rounder-upper' from the library that they had not had the *time* to return it themselves. The library was only a matter of yards from any hut in the camp, so that just shows what a busy crowd we were in this workless existence.

In the evenings, the favourite occupations were playing cards or draughts, or if possible, listening to the gramophone. There were quite a few portables in the camp before the end, but there was never one tenth of the number in demand. The owner of a gramophone was, therefore, very popular. Night after night, with never a break, he would be invited out to hut do's, and he could smoke and eat and drink tea to his heart's content, provided that he kept the handle turning.

Records wore out quickly in Stalag life - especially if you bought your needles from the marts - and getting new ones through the mail was a very chancy business. One fellow received an album of the *Kreutzer Sonata* - unfortunately without the records: another got a Mozart symphony, with every record neatly cracked in two. This was not carelessness in the post: it was thoroughness by some censors in Berlin. It seemed that the Huns were looking for concealed maps and it was thoughtful of them, not having found any, to put their okay marks on the discs they had ruined.

Despite this vandalism, however, there was gradually accumulated a fine library of recorded music and the 'Kalian Group' was formed to give twice weekly concerts in the quietest place available. Dal's delightful sketch of men listening to Beethoven may have been inspired at a gramophone recital, or it may have been suggested by the audience at one of the Sunday piano recitals; for men like Charles Loebel, Dennis Whiteley, or Captain France, all fine soloists, would ignore the unflattering condition of the Stalag piano

and play the classics to men who were sometimes hearing them for the first time. These concerts grew in popularity every week.

Charles Loebel, a young Jewish student, was a composer as well as a fine interpreter of music. Those of us who heard his lovely Trio for Horn, Violin and Piano given its first performance (in a lean-to made from Red Cross packing cases) hope that musical history will duly record that it was composed at Stalag 383, so that all at Hohenfels may bask in his glory.

Two Kneller Hall musicians who did great work in the camp were John Rymer and Ben Sorrell. John's most ambitious effort, I thought, was to raise a Stalag symphony orchestra which tackled the *Eroica* as a first attempt! Shortage of experienced string players handicapped them, but they put up some grand performances and re-introduced the music of Mendelsohn to the Reich which had banned it. Ben's military band once gave a rendering of Tschaikowski's 1812 *Overture*, complete with 'noises and flashes off,' and the fact that this warlike music was played just before D-Day led the Huns to believe that we had known the date of the second front and

were celebrating it thus! Very imaginative people, Huns.

Learning to play musical instruments was naturally one of the chief pastimes of Stalag life, and there were so many dance bands, swing orchestras, accordeon outfits and harmonica combinations that the fairest thing to do is to pick out none of them. If that sounds a bit ambiguous – well, it's meant to. Anyway, it may safely be said that every form of musical taste was catered for at Hohenfels, and if a man had nothing else to do he could still lie on his bed listening to bagpipe practice, cookhouse bugles and the songs of Jerry troops marching to manoeuvres. Alternatively, he could just lie on his bed – for nothing I have said about Stalag pastimes must hide the fact that bed-bashing, pure and simple, was the favourite occupation of many.

Only one thing – a really good play or show – was enough to rouse some fellows from their bunks, and since both the Ofladium and the National Theatre of Hohenfels achieved that miracle on occasion, they deserve a short chapter to themselves, and shall get it.



'Beethoven'

Nights of Gladness

THE old, bright magic of the Theatre was doubly potent in a prison camp, for nothing else gave such release from drabness. By contrast with the dreary world outside – a world of dingy huts and soldiers' washing – the footlights were more brilliant, the scenes more gay and lavish, and the music and the costumes more alluring.

All this applied at Hohenfels. But though the Theatre gained from its surroundings and though circumstances lent it extra glamour, there was something more behind its glowing triumph: there was talent, work and, sometimes, inspiration. The shows put on were good by any standards.

The Germans seemed to think so. Minor drawbacks such as not knowing English did not prevent them from sitting spellbound through plays, while revues and pantomimes in which the 'girls' were featured left them simply gasping. As for Comic Opera, so delighted was the Kommandant with the *Mikado* that he cancelled roll call for three days in its honour, which Gilbert and Sullivan would have deemed a pretty tribute.

Generally speaking, however, apart from planting their posteriors in the front row stalls, the Jerries did little for the Theatre. Indeed, in its humble beginnings, they were dead against it. Providing no materials themselves, they screamed 'sabotage' when pioneer stage constructors helped themselves to wood, pulling down a few huts in the process, and they made more than formal protests when electric bulbs and fittings disappeared from their own administrative offices.

Later, when the Theatre proved a great success despite them, they realized that entertainment was necessary and that photographs in Red Cross magazines of prisoners enjoying themselves made good propaganda. They therefore offered keen co-operation, and if this consisted of little more than not interfering too much, it was all that was required of them. We



were thankful that they did not confiscate stage suits of clothes on the grounds that they might be used in escape attempts, for instance, and that they did not habitually switch the lights off or call a roll call in the middle of a show; for tactics like that were not unknown in some Stalags and were apt to mar the best rehearsed productions.

Eventually, there were two permanent Theatres at Hohenfels, each capable of holding several hundred men, which meant that the average Kriegie could look forward to 'doing a show' about once a fortnight, the other thirteen nights being just what was needed to whet a gay dog's appetite.

Known as the Ofladium (the camp had once been an Oflag) the main Theatre was a long, barn-like building to which many tons of earth were transported and stamped down methodically to form a sloping floor. Apart from the packing-case fauteuils reserved for distinguished guests, there were no permanent seats in the Ofladium and the audience had to bring their room forms with them, different companies attending each night and a rota system deciding where each hut could place its own seats.

Everybody was convinced that his own particular hut had been fobbed off with more back row positions than anybody else's, so

every performance was preceded by caustic comments on the barefaced racketeers in front. But apart from this, and the facts that the atmosphere was either freezing or stifling according to season and that there seemed to be a whole forest of posts between the audience and the stage, it may be said that a select audience nightly packed a really first-class Theatre.

Certainly the stage itself was excellent. The proscenium, curtain and orchestral pit were all that could be wished, the colour scheme of rose and sea green being highly tasteful. The orchestral pit was a triumph of diplomacy. For reasons made plain in later chapters, the Germans did not encourage digging feats by Kriegies. It was therefore put to the Kommandant that he might like to view the Theatre and make suggestions. He did so and, having casually asked where the band would sit, found himself handing out chits for shovels, some of which were no doubt returned after use.

The orchestra, nicely dressed in blue shirts and usually conducted by Ben Sorrell, were above the normal standard for a Music Hall. The House Manager's evening dress suit was not only a triumph of blanket tailoring, but was expandable or contractible to the figure of anybody who happened to be compèring a variety show or announcing at a symphony concert, while the original 'usherettes,' in their neat little skirts and pill-box hats, collected thousands of cigarettes for the stage funds, even if they were apt to get pugilistic with wisecrackers in the audience. Finally, the stage lighting was most effective and if the limelight men on their barn beam perch never toppled off, they disappointed us in no other way.

In short, all the appointments of the Ofladium gave rise to pleasurable anticipation before the curtain rose on the actual show, and I can only say that it was very seldom that the play or other entertainment fell short of expectations.

There were a number of professional and semi-professional actors in the camp and these men not only gave of their best themselves, but were tireless in their coaching of talented amateurs, of whom there was no shortage in a camp of six thousand men.

With the assistance of professional dress-makers, tailors, carpenters, electricians, scene painters, etc., all with plenty of time and

enthusiasm to spare, the Stalag impressarios produced play after play, putting on anything from Shakespeare to Noel Coward with increasing confidence. A play like *Night Must Fall* would be acted, dressed, lighted and produced to a standard quite equal to that of an average Repertory Company in England, while the stage sets and furnishings were often better than those of a normal production in the provinces.

Where some of the materials came from was a mystery – especially to the Germans – but skill, patience and craftsman's pride could convert Red Cross packing cases into sumptuous drawing room suites, and tailors asked nothing more than blankets and palliasses covers to make the smartest lounge and evening suits for the stage.

Frequent appeals for handkerchiefs, sheets, coloured shirts, pyjamas, or any unwanted articles from clothing parcels were made, and the camp responded well. The skill of many hands would then convert these odds and ends into frocks and evening gowns that any girl would covet. A good deal of stuff from grease paint to stockings was obtained through the rackets – a cigarette fund supported by the sale of theatre photographs providing the basis – and last, and probably least, were those essentials that the Germans helped us purchase through the Munich shops, the inevitable cigarettes being converted into Marks.

One useful gesture the Jerries did make was to loan us the complete costumes for *The Merchant of Venice* from the State Theatre of Berlin; and though this was done simply because they considered it an anti-Jewish play, it was none the less welcome. A grand production was most enthusiastically received and I remember few more impressive performances than that of Bob Jarvis, an Australian professional, who gave Shylock a fine dignity rather disturbing to the Germans in the stalls.

Shylock's daughter was played by a sergeant whose name escapes me, but under the magic of the Theatre the character was just Jessica and it was as easy to accept her beauty as to accept Lorenzo and the moonlit bank the lovers sat upon.

Since the absence of women was the chief thing that distinguished the Stalag Theatre from the ordinary Dramatic Society, the female impersonators were all-important; and perhaps

the first thing I should say about them is that most of them were not female impersonators at all: they were actors taking female parts, which is quite a different thing.

Portia, for instance, was played by Robert Teather, a character actor whom I first saw as Richelieu and whose features, voice and gestures were naturally suited to that part. Yet from the hard, ambitious cardinal to the much admired heiress was a simple step for Bob. Growing his long hair longer still and ironing out the thought lines on his pensive brow, he looked, spoke and moved like a perfect Portia, just as he later gave a completely convincing portrait of the tough old Lady Bracknell.

However, all the acting ability in the world would not have made Bob bearable in certain female parts. He looked as though he'd lived on Stalag rations all his life, so he spared us his appearance in backless evening gowns, and producers of plays like *George and Margaret*, *Dinner at Eight*, *I Killed the Count*, and all the other modern plays, looked elsewhere for their heroines. They sought for fellows who could act seriously, and who could also make up to look like girls—glamorous and sophisticated girls.

This was not easy. There was no lack of nice-looking fellows, outside my own acquaintances, but they were not necessarily actors and they

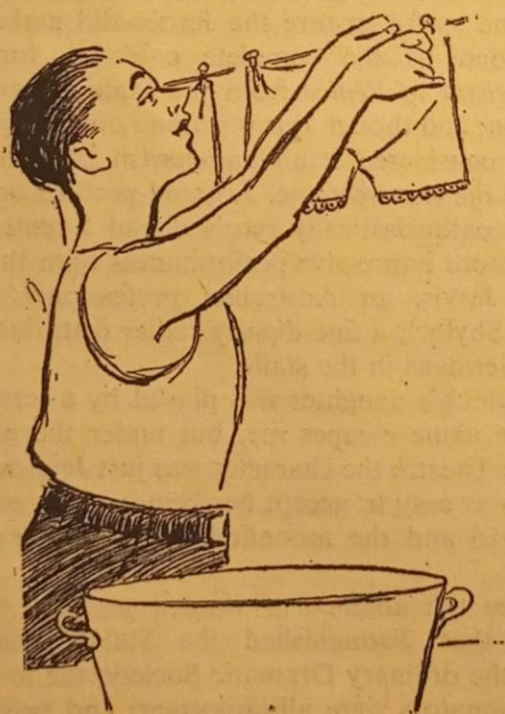
naturally felt shy about facing a Kriegie audience in feminine finery. However, a few brave souls, realizing that someone had to play the leading lady if the Theatre was to function at all, cast away self-consciousness and learnt the job. Some of them were most successful. They could wear the most dazzling of dresses, the most daring of hair-do's and the highest of heels with perfect naturalness, and they could carry off the most sentimental lines and situations without embarrassment.

Given the ribald atmosphere of a prison camp, it was no mean feat of acting that enabled love scenes to be played without self-conscious winking at the audience. There would be a little ripple of amusement upon the first entry of the ersatz beauty, but no sniggers from the pit would be heard to mar the later lines, for the illusion of watching and listening to a normal actress would be wellnigh perfect. All that paint, powder and judicious padding could do to convert a corporal into a vamp would be done—and done well. The rest depended upon acting, which was usually forthcoming in good measure.

Two pioneers in 'straight' feminine roles who deserved full marks were Sergts. Bill Eadie and Bert Harris. Bill was probably the only 'leading lady' in stage history who broke a jaw in a football match, but still played the heroine at the night's performance.

In lighter roles, some deliciously clever feminine studies were given by Stan Hawkins, while Teddy Laws and Bernard Cockroft were also noted for comedienne parts with touches of genuine observation. Stan Long was the most formidable mother-in-law outside reality and Robin Owen, a professional, played the difficult role of Gwenny in *The Late Christopher Bean* with more than feminine subtlety. But there were so many fine individual performances, in both male and female roles, that I cannot do more than mention Terence Cook's Danny in *Night Must Fall* as one of them.

Revues and variety shows were largely carried by Jack Harris, an Australian comedian of great experience, by Jimmy Duncan, Dave Tulip and a whole host of non-serious female impersonators, who wore wigs or bandeaux and skirts and stockings to prove that they were really chorus girls. Some of them were exceedingly clever in making their own clothes and if you came upon a fellow washing stockings or French



knickers in the Stalag laundry you didn't raise an eyebrow. You merely asked him whether he was appearing at the National (the second permanent Theatre, situated in the dance hall) or at one of the bigger club concerts, which might be given anywhere.

Perhaps the favourite female star in revue was the Stalag 'Show girl,' Don (Pinkie) Smith, who, in Ascot frock and picture hat looked absolutely radiant and who could mimic girlish coquettishness so perfectly that he did the fair sex some disservice. 'Just shows you what frauds girls are!' said the cynics. 'A spot of paint and powder, a few yards of curtains – and a bloke like Pinkie beats the lot for looks!'

Off the stage, or in the male roles he sometimes played, Pinkie was revealed as a cheerful lad in glasses, so his startling transformation was a first-class tribute to the make-up men and to the fashion artists who 'created' his models. One of these fashion artists – it would be inadequate to call him a dressmaker – was that same Stan Hawkins who so delighted us in Mrs. Feather roles. His organization (Decoria Ltd.) was responsible for dressing whole shows and I presume that to him goes the chief honours for the really brilliant way in which Gilbert and Sullivan operas were costumed.

Not only *The Mikado*, but *The Gondoliers*, *The Yeomen of the Guard*, and *H.M.S. Pinafore* were staged at Hohenfels and were delightfully well sung and acted to the most enthusiastic audience the Stalag ever had. That grand little pro, Sam Brierley, was probably the man most entitled to credit for the smooth production and his own singing and acting set a standard which Taffy Sanders, John MacKay and Elwyn

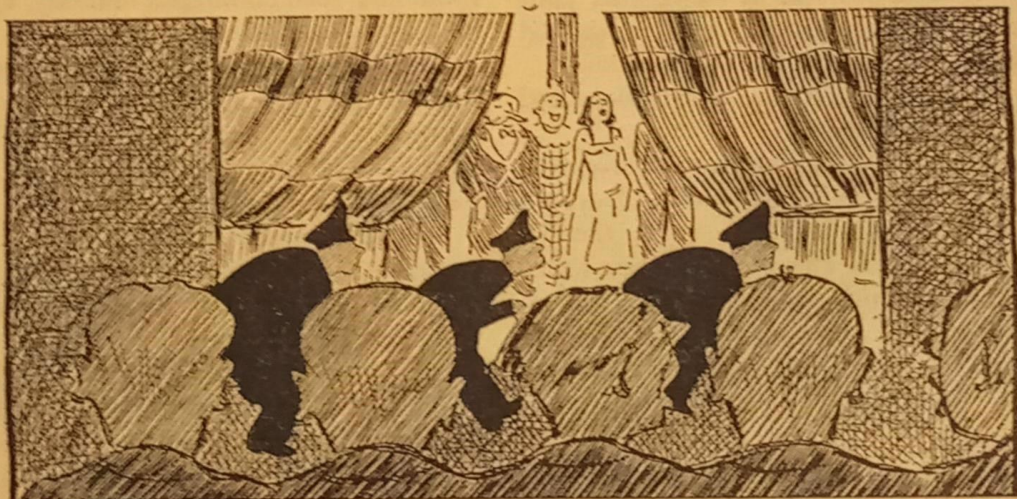
Jones, to mention but three, maintained throughout. Of all the enchanting things in *The Mikado*, what pleased the Ofladium audience most, was the appearance, acting and singing of the 'Three Little Maids from School,' which was encored time and again.

The Germans, as I have said, were as enthralled as anybody, for to them the music of Sullivan was a revelation, those who had heard of him at all having thought of him as a mere imitator of Offenbach. Strange that it should be left to prisoners of war to change those ideas, and to instal into Teutonic heads that England, too, had composers.

But there was one British tune which the Germans never heard. Every performance at the Ofladium or the National concluded with 'God Save the King,' and perhaps it was the Theatre's greatest triumph that the Kommandant allowed it to be played openly – after the German guests had left the hall.

Just before the final curtain, a signal would be given and the Kommandant and his staff would depart. Then the orchestra would break into the National Anthem, and never would it be sung more heartily than by those Stalag audiences, whose nostalgia for home had been quickened by the Theatre.

And now, having merely sketched the facts about the main entertainment at Hohenfels, I hand over to William Kemp, who will write about the unique 'Social Clubs' in the Stalag. Then Messrs. John Mallory and John Hamilton will tell, respectively, about the School and the Debating Society, after which I must devote some space to the greatest Stalag pastime of the lot – galloping.



Clubs were Trumps

by WILLIAM KEMP

CLUBS were trumps – and there was a full deck of them in Stalag 383.

At the height of the club craze, there were getting on for 100 'get-together' organizations in the camp. When the camp strength was just over 4,000 men, club members numbered well over 5,000. For there was nothing to prevent a man being a member of more than one club, and some 'Joiners' were members of half a dozen.

There was something uncanny about the ease with which you found yourself a clubman. There was none of the 'proposer and seconder' patter. There was no old-school-tie qualifications, no system of 'black-balling' which is found in some exclusive brotherhoods.

No. Some important-looking guy came dashing round with a pencil and paper – in a camp of non-working N.C.Os. there were of course plenty of these chit-merchants, – 'You're from Sussex? Right, you're in the Sussex Club.'

That was that. There wasn't very much you could do about it, was there, except 'Bring your own mug' when the Sussex Club Social came round. But Sussex was only a beginning, and unless you were a man of iron will, you found yourself carting that blessed mug around as if it were chained to you.

For along come other important-looking guys with other chits of paper. 'Your mother came from Ireland.' You worked in Newcastle, your wife belonged to Edinburgh, you'd a second cousin in Liverpool.

Clubs were trumps, and the chit-traders had dealt you a hand of them.

Somebody must have started it, of course, and I think that honour belongs to the Liverpool men, with the haggis-bashers – sorry, the St. Andrew's Society – following close on their heels.

At the full tide of the movement, club notice-boards crowded each other on the barrack-room outer walls. All were brightly coloured and some were most elaborate affairs, with eaves like a dovecot.

When the Gaelic Society – haggis league with

which 'Basher' McLean had a lot to do – posted a notice, one of their members immediately dashed to the Secretary, and said breathlessly: –

'Look here you'll have to stop these bloody Palestinians from posting notices on our board!' It must be added that this particular Gael hadn't been long in the Gaelic Club.

At the ebb of the club movement – the last hungry 383 winter – notice-boards disappeared. They were used for fuel. After all the huts were a bit dilapidated by this time, and you could not take your last beam down. It was different with the Yanks nearing Nuremberg!

And what were the advantages of being a club-man? Oh, boy, ask those Aussies and Kiwis! Oh, boy, those brews – and brews!

Five 'do's' in a week was just about the most anyone could stand. But it was possible, when clubs were trumps, to shave, brush your hair, fix collar and tie, disinfect your mug, and step out seven nights a week.

After about three weeks of this, it was almost a relief to know that, in one case at least, your mug wouldn't be necessary. Somebody or other had got at the beer before the event! They say that one official drank four club brews on his own, but I don't believe it.

But I will say that I saw three club barrels knocked off one night by a private party. Our room had been de-bugged that day, and we were all a bit light-headed.

Sometimes, on the great night, there was more than a trace of *aqua vitae* in the girthsome barrel. 'Order, gentlemen, please. Sit down. There's plenty for everybody. Order, gentlemen, please – ' Ah, memories, memories.

Sandwiches, pasties and cakes baked by club members – Cpl. Nogan, 'shun – were a feature of many club suppers. One of the reasons why the movement declined was the fact that food became too short for even a cup of tea to be offered – and a social meeting isn't the same without a cup of tea, is it?

Many club gatherings featured an excellent

cabaret show. 'Dun and D' never failed with 'Barefoot Days' and I have seen Stan Long and Fred Parker gallantly do several shows in a night just to keep the boys cheery - hurrying in their female attire from hall to hall, 'and no escort, thank you (Sniff).'

The 'Captive Drones' could score with a spot of real honey in their cakes, and they had two smashing bakers in Ron Butler and Harry Adams.

Stormiest business meetings were said to be those of the Glasgow Club. 'On a point of order, Mr. Chairman.'

The Glasgow Club, like a great many others, was responsible for the 'adoption' of some of our Channel Island comrades. Clubs which adopted a Channel Islander collected for him clothing, soap and other necessities which he was able to parcel up and send to his people.

And many a Blighty boy, too, must have a very high word of praise for the clubs. When he came in short of kit, when his parcels didn't turn up on time, in stepped his 'townies' of the club and saw him right.

Stage entertainment of a very high standard was provided by some of the bigger clubs. The Aussies and Kiwis had some very fine shows. Glasgow and London too. And I shall always remember the Welsh Club's 'Hewers of Coal.'

Here it must be mentioned that while we were still waiting for the second front - oh glorious long-awaited D-Day - Stalag 383's Clubs were engaged in two major wars. One was about the stage in the National Theatre (or K2 as it was better known) and the other was about the football pitch.

There was no 'unconditional surrender' about either of these two wars. Peace hasn't been signed yet as far as I know. While they lasted, they provided argument and counter-argument, meeting and counter-meeting, and notice and counter-notice, which must have used up a whole Norwegian forest, if it was German and not Geneva paper the 'signatories' were using.

All said and done, however, the clubs got a lot of stage and a lot of pitch - more than one between five anyhow.

They ran several football tournaments, in which the dominating clubs were West Riding, Wales and Perth. When the Jerries finally got

me out of the camp with the last party, the Perth men were still hollering at Secretary Fincham for that promised shield which never materialized. Perhaps it made a brew of Ovaltine during the winter.

Mrs. German, of Leicester, sent a shield to the Leicester club for a basket-ball competition and club water-polo provided very good sport. 'Keep it up, Menora!' 'For God's sake Jackie Ross, don't drown.'

Biggest club 'creeps' were suffered by the man who opened the door of a pitch-dark fire-hut, and heard a deep voice intone: 'My name is Death.'

It was only 'Dodger' Rodgers, Burns club maestro, warming his hands at a cold stove, reciting 'Death and Dr. Hornbook.'

One strange 'club,' flourishing in secret in the Nazi Germany which banned it, was composed of the Freemasons in the camp. They met behind bolted doors.

Accommodation was one of the clubs' biggest bugbears. They met in the School, in K2, in the Gym, in bagpipe haunted Dunvegan. Often they were hunted from room to room and a lot of them finished up in the open air.

A quiz, a talk, a spelling-bee - those were features of routine club meetings, when the club wasn't dealing with the resignation of one of its officials. For officials had a habit of resigning - the resignation bug often bit Stalag people.

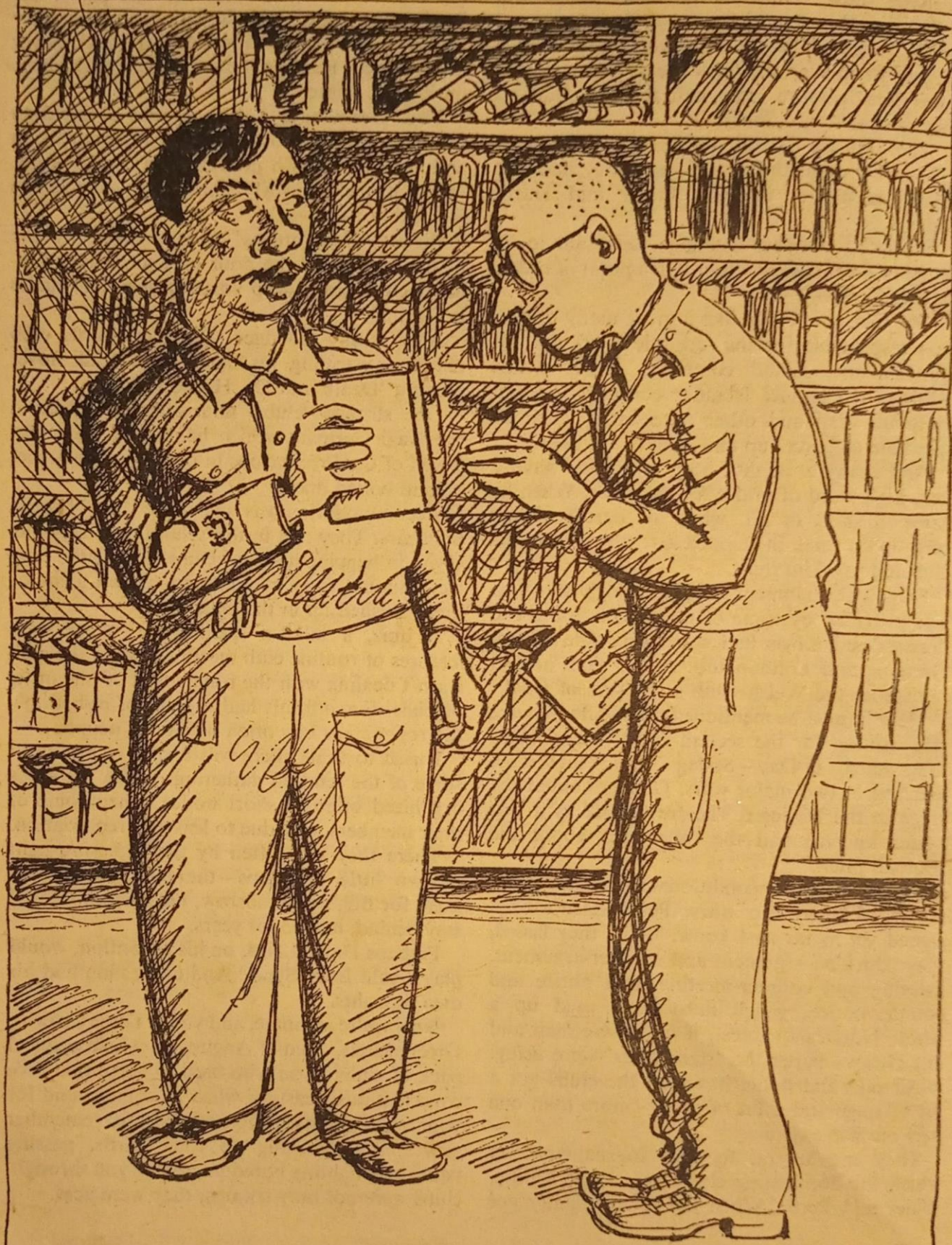
I used to think there was a spot of drama in some of the send-off gatherings which the clubs organized often at short notice, when some of their members were due to leave on repatriation.

There they sat - often by the flickering light of two little fat-lamps - the men who would leave for Blighty to-morrow, the men who would stay behind, maybe for years.

Perhaps Davie Laird, on his accordion, would play 'Auld Lang Syne.' And every man had his own thoughts.

Now we're all home, and you - Three Crowns, Greenjackets, Alen of Angus, the whole colossal pack of clubs - you who used to curse that too-conscientious treasurer when he came round for your weekly subscription of one fag, remember now that in keeping up your spirits, passing your time, fighting boredom, seeing you through, clubs were not only trumps, they were aces.

PHILOSOPHY



Back to School

by JOHN E. MALLORY

It has been said by Sir Richard Livingston, President of Corpus Christi, that education, like religion, quickly degenerates into a routine and that then its meaning and its effects are lost.

It is only when one looks back upon the Stalag years from the depths of an armchair that one sees in perspective, as a shapely whole, that conglomeration of experiences that made up prison life: now we realize more than ever that those days of 'back to school' never developed into mere routine and that they gave us something that will never be forgotten.

I remember 'Yank' Johnson at one of the meetings of the Talks and Debates Circle saying that if we could have got some bodies we all had the time to become doctors. 'Yank' was talking about the war as a pessimist and that was in the early part of 1943. How we jeered! Even then it was case of 'any minute now.' Though we could not have become physicians, very many men, hitherto without any trade or profession, profitably passed the years in fitting themselves to take up well-paid occupations when the 'great day' arrived.

The School at Stalag 383 was built out of nothing but determination. The Camp had been open only a few days, when MacKenzie, in September, 1942, convened a meeting of those interested in education. There were no books, no chalk, no blackboards, no writing paper, nothing but enthusiasm and that, directed by W.O. II Wright, was sufficient to make a start on thirty different subjects. German promises to help were not fulfilled, and the men who went to school in the then empty huts carried their own stools with them and wrote their notes on chocolate containers and tea packets.

When forms were obtained 'the rats got in' and they were stolen along with the stoves, floor packing and boards, and electric fittings. After two or three weeks in the huts, the pioneers were moved on again and settled in the National Theatre, at that time known by the Cabalistic title of K2.

Only 400 students out of more than a 1,000 survived that first winter. Two classes worked in the one large room and it was a brave heart that defied the cold. Men like Basil Marin, who taught advanced French and three grades of Spanish, spent whole afternoons taking consecutive classes with unfailing cheerfulness and efficiency. Do you remember Basil's trousers? Day by day they became more threadbare and ragged. I was glad when new clothing arrived. It is the only time I have been taught by a man without a seat in his pants.

Regularly appeals were sent by Don Wright to Geneva and Oxford for material with which to carry on. Don was deceptively unassuming and seemed to lack that drive which made a man a Stalag personality and won him a coveted 'bunk.' Yet the amount of work he did was phenomenal; and those letters would have melted a heart of stone.

Two months after opening, the school received half a dozen rubbers and a few pencils and T-squares. These were followed by a few note-books for the Australians, but only sufficient to give each man four or five sheets. Then material, much of it from Sweden, began to arrive more regularly and there was enough for a general issue, though there never was a glut.

From the Spring of 1943 onwards the School never looked back. More subjects were added to the curriculum, more study groups were organized, instructors came forward in numbers and problems of organization became more difficult to solve. Time-tables appeared pinned to bunks, for some men were spending nearly all day in educating or re-educating themselves. The choice grew wider; the curriculum strode through the alphabet from aeronautics to zoology, Maori, Japanese, Hebrew, Dutch and Arabic, equitation, veterinary science and viticulture, I.C. engines, C.I. engines, road building, radio communications and photography, banking, estate management and town planning, psychology, graphology and educational theory, and

added to these, all the usual school subjects which were in such great demand that some were organized in triplicate. Great characters like S./Sergt. 'Sammy' Mattatia were taking six different language classes twice a week.

Didactic apparatus was improvised from the most unpromising material. The equitation group's horse made of a barrel, palliasses covers, string off Red Cross parcels and odd pieces of wood achieved more than local fame. I recently found its description in a shop in Derby! Perhaps John McTigue's humorous poem, 'There's a Horse in our Schoolroom,' helped to make it as widely known as a Derby winner.

The transition from K2 to 'Coney Island,' the stable which eventually became the school and library, was slow and difficult, move and counter-move, discussion, and sometimes acrimonious argument took place between the concert parties and clubs then in possession and those who were interested in education. Inevitably the maxim, 'the greatest good for the greatest number' was produced by both sides and statistics were hurled backwards and forwards by protagonists of all parties.

The inevitable compromise solution was reached and the various parties agreed to share. Partitions were erected with wood from Red Cross boxes and gloomy cabins without windows except for the blue-painted skylights became the seat of learning. One could, by exercising great humility and giving many promises, 'borrow' an electric light bulb from the caretaker, 'Talkie' Turkington - if the electricity was not turned off. Then the student with a belly-aching hunger and empty 'tucker' box could feast his imagination on the stencilled inscriptions on the classroom walls - 'Armour's Veribest Corned Beef,' '3 doz. 1 lb. Peach Jam,' 'Oxford Sausages,' 'Produce of Argentina,' 'Stow Away from Boilers,' 'Genoa Transit,' 'Col. Iselin, Lisbon.'

Or the instructor, involved perhaps in describing Kohler's 'Gestalt' theory in psychology, the theory of form and shape, would be drowned by a tattoo of hammering with saw accompaniment, as stage properties, super bookmakers' stands, or armchairs for the 'Elite' took form and shape on the other side of the frail boxwood. Sometimes 'Talkie' would hold a 'swarry' in his room, quite in the manner of Sam Weller at Bath, and crooners and accordions sobbed and snored a couple of feet away.

The number of students continued to grow and it became impossible to share Coney Island with concert parties. On the other hand the concert parties, too, felt that they were playing an important part in maintaining morale, and that quite rightly, and there was another constitutional crisis, resulting in the whole of the building being taken over for education with the clubs using it during the evenings.

When 'Talkie' found himself unable to reach the Sports Field in time for 8.30 parade one morning, he was ejected from his caretaker job and Roy Veryard took his place. Roy and his staff worked day and night to make a real school, though it must be said that 'Turkey' with his organizing drive had done a great job and many were sorry to see him retire into the obscurity of hut-dwelling.

Six classrooms were built and wired, windows were hacked in the walls, which were coloured, and injunctions not to throw 'fag' ends about replaced the stencilled descriptions of food and stevedores' instructions. Forms and tables, dragged four miles on improvised sledges from German barracks, completed the furniture, and the fiction library which had outgrown its accommodation in a hut was rehoused in the school. A large and comprehensive technical library was organized in the same building and the school became the Stalag's biggest and best equipped institution.

All this indicates a lavish flow of material. The British Red Cross spared neither expense nor encouragement and sent the most useful and valuable textbooks obtainable. I wonder if the Agricultural Group knew how great were the efforts made to send them books on Veterinary Science? A few days ago I visited the Bodleian Library and met the lady who is the Red Cross adviser on Agricultural and Veterinary Science books. She told me that those books were the best on the subject and that she had to write to booksellers all over the country before she could get them.

Co-operating with the Red Cross were the European Student Relief Fund and the Y.M.C.A. in Geneva, and in addition the Swedish Y.M.C.A., the men of Science in America, and the Canadian Red Cross sent quantities of writing material, drawing instruments, slide rules and books; never has a school been so amply equipped with so many books on such a multitude of subjects.

Special enrolment days raised the number of student subjects to over 3,000 and the number of students, excluding those, who worked privately, to 2,500. At its peak, the curriculum was comprised of 84 different subjects.

The number and variety of examinations taken was remarkable. Even to one engaged in education for a number of years the multiplicity of examining bodies was a continual surprise. It is possible to take examinations in everything from arithmetic to hairdressing and the successes won by Stalag students form a record to be proud of. The conditions under which examinations were taken were often appalling in their discomfort. Apart from the disadvantages of hunger, there was in winter the cold with which to contend. It was quite normal, particularly during the last winter of 1944-45, to write while muffled in greatcoat, scarf balaclava and mittens with the additional comfort of a blanket wrapped round one's legs. The padres did a fine job of work, sitting day after day as invigilators under such bitter conditions.

Yet the record of examination successes was magnificent. More than 2,000 candidates in 1,000 examinations showed 90 per cent. passes very many with credits and distinctions. The R.S.A. and matriculation examinations were the favourites, but several men succeeded in graduating and very many qualified as linguists. Here it may be said out of fairness that the German authorities co-operated to help in making examinations a success. It was seldom that papers under the magic seal of the Red Cross were opened before they reached the invigilator; but they might have given us more coal!

No account of education would be complete without some mention of the semi-independent groups. First among these was the St. John Ambulance Brigade under its Secretary-Organizer, Sergt. A. E. White - 'Blanco' was the only prisoner I knew who did not want to be relieved for just a few more weeks! The reason was that his Brigade had an examination record in First Aid and Home Nursing of 490, and he wanted to see a nice round 500. I had lunch with Blanco the other day; he tells me that he is anticipating being made a Brother of the Order. It is a well-earned honour.

The spectacle of a dreamy, contemplative, pipe-smoking semicircle of men sitting on the grass round a couple of bee-hives in the enclosure near the Sports Field gate did not mean that those men were monopolizing the only square of turf left in that muddy wilderness of Stalag 383 for the purpose of extending their already ample rest period. They were the Captive Drones with their instructor, C.S.M. Savage, and their President, Padre Grant, learning the satisfying, bucolic art of bee-keeping, a pastime old when Virgil described it. 'Leisure is a noble thing,' said the Ancient Greeks, and these men were nobly spending their enforced leisure. Their results in the examination of the Bee Keepers' Association show how profitably these men studied bees.

Already the memories of Stalag days are growing mellow. Human nature, resilient and optimistic, submerges the miseries of mud, starvation, overcrowding and incarceration. There comes to the top those finer, cleaner things which can be recalled readily and with pride. Many fine Camp institutions will contend for first place; but none for the lasting benefits it conferred on so many can equal that Barbed Wire University at Stalag 383.



Homework

Even in Words

by JOHN HAMILTON

If war can be justly described as long stretches of acute boredom punctuated by moments of intense excitement, it makes it easy to draw a comparable picture of P.O.W. life. The long stretches of boredom are there, the moments of intense excitement are missing. In the place of the latter are moments of a somewhat milder intensity when we fetch into play our attempts to wage war on the former – amateur theatricals, social evenings, musical concerts, sports, and a variety of other diversions and amusements. And fitting somewhere in the ranks of those fighting the good fight against the weary hours is the 'Stalag 383 Talks and Debates Circle.' This body came into being just after the opening of the camp to help fill what was then a heavy gap in our social and cultural lives.

It hardly had a propitious birth. Just sheer enthusiasm carried it over those early and difficult days when meeting places were hard to get and cold and cheerless when we did get them. When speakers were much more of a gamble in respect of their ability to entertain a few hundred disillusioned men than their selection is now, when we have experience to guide us. When we never knew whether we were to be addressed by a voice that sounded as though it was endeavouring to establish direct touch with its nearest and dearest in faraway lands, or at the other extreme a voice which sounded as if its chastened possessor was imparting strictly confidential information to the family doctor. Before very long, however, the proverbial sorting of the wheat from the chaff began, and with the aid of a few men who had had some small experience of speaking in public, and who gladly and unselfishly placed their few talents and time at the disposal of our first committee, a gradual improvement set in. With their help that first, and probably best committee, contrived a mixture of sugar and sand that slowly but surely won public favour, and eventually found a permanent place in the affection of many of our 5,000 camp members.

At the end of the first six months the picture, if by no means perfect, was certainly more pleasing. By then we had graduated from unpleasant meeting places and haphazard meetings to the dignity of a twice a week fixture in our most palatial camp theatre 'K.2.' There on Tuesday evenings we would listen to our lecturers. On Friday evenings we would not only listen but often join in when our debaters, with the portentous solemnity of well girthed aldermen, put their cases forward. These arrangements have suffered but little change to date. We still meet twice a week but Sunday has been substituted for Tuesday, and one of the two meetings is held in our other very comfortable camp theatre, the 'Ofladium.'

The last two years have therefore thrown a multitude of subjects and speakers into public view, and it is a personal opinion that some small benefit has been extracted by many camp members who have had that refreshing thing, a new point of view, applied to many problems and subjects on which they have previously held preconceived and possibly erroneous ideas. Granting that the value of the circle as applied to camp members as a whole is a transient one, a filling in of time which might possibly be occupied in brooding on mainly imaginary hardships, there is little doubt that in some cases it has provided direct information for some individuals which will prove of value in their future.

As to the actual activities of the circle they have more or less run true to form with the main idea that underlay the creation of the first debating group the world ever saw. Each one created since has resolved to be different, and eventually each one has followed the recognized pattern. In our case we too determined to be different, but even with the advantage of unusual circumstances and surroundings it wasn't long before we were well into the old hackneyed subjects. We were only saved from debating 'Capital Punishment should be abolished' by

the passionate pleading of one committee member who had already met it five times in a short and obviously misspent life.

However the privilege of isolation has added a new zest to the discussion of these other more or less sedate and recognized vehicles for debate – Politics, religion, woman's rights, social reform, legalized prostitution, &c., &c. – as with no Mrs. Grundyish criticisms to contend with and no old and stupid conventions to outrage, many phrases and ideas are voiced that even the bright young things of the 1920's might have fought shy of. Rigid we are indeed in our insistence that none of the so-called 'naughty' words shall be voiced in public, but we have no censor to lay down rules as to what lengths implication can go to. In the case of the one or two unusually hearty adjectives that have so far slipped through our moral guard, they have been regarded less as solecisms than the product of moments of mental excitement.

So far our meetings have produced funny moments, happy moments, thinking moments; and numerous are the debates that have started in 'K.2' and where many camp huts are concerned have been abandoned some months later with a no decision result. You who lack the P.O.W. atmosphere would doubtless be surprised to learn that a subject can be so dissected as to provide material for discussion for undreamt of periods of time. At the cost of freedom we have discovered a trade secret that had previously been jealously guarded by members of Royal Commissions.

He would be a carping critic who would quarrel with our debaters on the grounds that theirs is bludgeon work rather than rapier play. True it is we are not overblessed with Burkes, Sheridans or Pitts, but we do have more than our share of counterparts to Strube's little man. And as we by no means totally lack the skilful thrust we enjoy it all the more on its comparatively rare appearances. All in all our speakers provide a mixed diet with common sense predominating, and so far I doubt if any trace could be found of the mental stagnation that is popularly supposed to set in with close or confined living. It is only because I am unwilling to rouse what could be unkind memories to the few that I refrain from reminiscing on many items of repartee and interjection that were well worthy of a Wilkes or a Wilde.

It may possibly be of some small interest to others to learn what results some of our debates provided. By large majorities we voted for 'War is inevitable,' 'Public schools should be open to all,' 'Modern art is decadent,' 'Women's place is in the home,' 'The Modern pulpit is a dying force,' 'The Beveridge Plan' and possibly our greatest revolt was against the motion that 'Public houses in England should be open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.' Such a sacrilegious idea justly received the fate it deserved.

By smaller majorities we also decided that 'Prostitution should be legalized in the British Isles,' 'The freedom of the British Press is a myth,' and in discussing the affairs of 'Cabbages and Kings' we also reached other decisions too numerous to mention. These decisions can hardly be claimed as interesting sidelines produced by unusual circumstances. Rather do I think them representative of the popular reaction to those matters.

Possibly it is on our talks that we really spread ourselves. Lecturers from all ranks of life rise in all their glory, and so far a multitude of subjects have been discussed ranging from 'The romance of refuse' to 'Civilization is at the Crossroads.' Taxi drivers, New Guinea Patrol Officers, experts on Russia, Art critics, professional hoboos, all these have at various times contributed magnificently to our pleasant evenings. I shall regard it as a personal grievance if I have to bid farewell to this life without hearing, at first hand, the experience of a Tibetan Llama. If the twang of the long bow does resound once or twice what matter that. We who are busy planning our P.O.W. reminiscences for the enlightenment of our friends in the 'local' cannot object to receiving such practical demonstrations that may be put to future profit.

The lecture that has so far created the greatest interest was one entitled 'Intelligent people must abandon Christianity.' Battle was joined a few days before the lecture on the appearance of the poster advertising it. The camp religionists showed strong opposition to the whole thing, but truth compels me to state that the lecture itself had a great reception. Not that we were, as a community, godless. Rather the reverse. But tolerance to all speakers and complete freedom of speech were laws that were always observed. Freedom of speech was a principle that caused a great deal of commotion before it could be

established. Many people had argued that certain subjects should be closed to public discussion at all times. On a vote being taken on the matter, a very large majority decided that complete freedom of speech was desirable. No doubt our surroundings influenced the vote. There was undoubtedly a strong attraction in living in one of the few places in the then Greater, now Lesser, Reich, where such a practice could be observed without detriment to one's future health.

Under the heading 'Know your Empire' a series of lectures were given that were outstanding for their clarity and presentation. Australian, New Zealand, Canadian and South African P.O.W.s all formed committees whose particular task it was to concoct a talk on their country that would interest and entertain listeners. They all succeeded so well that in some cases repeat talks had to be given and literally hundreds of questions answered after each meeting. There seems little doubt that many seeds of emigration have been sown in Hohenfels which will be harvested many miles away from it.

Jock Kane, the famous hun-hater and Stalin-stalwart, gives a series of war reviews whose value is hard to estimate. Even if they are, as some critics claim, just pep talks, the popular view is that we can't get enough of them. Naturally they are hardly advertised as war reviews, but are billed under such innocuous and misleading titles as 'Summer Sports' to, we hope, the confusion of those of our captors who walk around inside the camp. How really delightful to sit in the 'Ofladium' and hear Jock air his views on German military might.

Never have hosts been so severely castigated, and never have guests revelled in such unseemly mirth during the operation.

Finally a tribute to the 'old and popular.' Those speakers who could always be relied on for a good display and whose efforts have done much to making the circle the success it is. If I merely mention such names as Edgar, Morten, Lindsay, Macmasters, Mallory, Ross, it is not because they are all. The fact is so many deserve recognition that space will not permit of their mention. For the popular and efficient secretary, Arthur Hill, mere mention is not enough. The energy he has expended in the cause of the 'T. & D. Circle' is as vast as the success that has crowned his efforts.

The days will come when P.O.W. life will be a memory. A vague memory that, dimmed and softened by time, will tend to reflect the pleasanter aspects of an unpleasant mode of living. Then we will surely find satisfaction in thinking of the efforts we made to keep sweet the 'uses of adversity.' Then indeed will we surely realize that concerts, sports, social evenings and all our other diversions were more and meant more than what appeared on the surface. For in them we have found some compensation and some measure of forgetfulness. Every second they lasted was a second less for brooding on the problem of 'When——.' All these things helped, and the 'T. & D. Circle' also helped when they put into practice that precept of Euripides which says 'Even in words there is a pleasure, when they bring forgetfulness of present woes.'

Trip to Vienna

PROLOGUE - XMAS 1943

HUT Sixteen didn't know them from Adam, but they were such quiet, nice-mannered fellows, and so obviously diffident about asking favours, that we lent them the records they asked for without a murmur. Not till they were out of earshot did we all burst forth about their hair.

'Those jokers should borrow scissors - not records' said Jim Tyre. 'They ought to get their hair cut - or buy violins' growled Alf Tuck. 'More like A.T.S. than soldiers' said someone else; and, like so many cheated barbers, we slandered the two visitors, putting every unfavourable construction, from laziness to effeminacy, upon their flowing locks.

Still, we did lend them the records.

STORY - SPRING 1944

IF, on that pleasant May evening, you had made your way to the Stalag gym, cleaved a passage through the motley crowd of boxers, wrestlers, weight lifters and other hearties, and peered into that peaceful haven, Jimmy Jamieson's massage room, you would have been puzzled by the following scene.

A big, burly fellow in battledress was tramping slowly up and down the room, a huge well-filled sack over his shoulder. Watching him critically was a small audience, including a fair-haired, ascetic-looking corporal, a smart continental gentleman in a heavy ulster - and a really dazzling brunette. This brunette was slender, beautifully coiffured, dressed in a sophisticated 'three piece ensemble' and had just that touch of distinction about shoes, stockings and handbag which marks the perfect lady.

So you would have been startled that such a lady should remark to the company: 'it's damned hard to keep your behind tucked in like that!'; and when the burly fellow with the sack put it down, opened it up, and a human head emerged to comment 'I'll say it is!' you would definitely have wondered what was going on.

Well, the scene was a dress rehearsal for one



of Stalag 383's best planned escapes, due to take place next day. The ascetic corporal was Michael McCallen, R.A.S.C. (late King's Regt.), Hohenfels' own Scarlet Pimpernel, the continental gentleman and the slim brunette were the prospective escapees, B.Q.M.S. Norman Drummond and Corporal Eddie Freestone, respectively, and the other occupants of the room were sundry stout fellows who were helping Norman and Eddie in various capacities.

Since that winter's day when the long-haired couple had shocked Hut Sixteen, Norman had had his hair cut - not to avoid the leg pulling and worse to which he and Eddie had steeled themselves, but because the original plan to both escape as women had now evolved to a sounder one.

In its way, this plan was a little miracle, and, like another well known miracle, it took exactly nine months to happen. Nine months of careful planning and attention to detail.

Hearing, through McCallen, of a 'contact' in Vienna, the two lads schemed to escape from Hohenfels, reach Vienna, and from there make their way through Hungary and the Balkans to Syria and the Allies.

The final guise settled upon was that of a professor and his wife, of 'Volks-Deutsch' origin, travelling from Copenhagen University to Vienna University for the purpose of studying Veterinary Science for the *Wehrmacht*, and all the documents, passports, clothes and knowledge they needed for this enterprise had to be acquired by degrees. It was hard work for the boys, but they soon found willing helpers.

Both lads spoke German fairly well, and Irvine Poppa, Palestinian soldier, one time

native of Vienna, helped them to acquire the accent they needed. He also drilled them in the geography of Vienna and gave them helpful hints as to correct behaviour in conversation with German civilians.

Keith Gadd undertook Eddie's hairdressing and make-up. Harry Morgan, advised, I think, by Stan Hawkins, performed miracles of tailoring from spare blankets, so that Norman's suit and ulster could vie with Eddie's chic ensemble. Tubby Jagers' stall produced shoes and stockings in that mystic way the marts produced everything. And the professor and his wife were also fitted up with a week-end case, containing silk undies for Frau Eddie, clean collars for Herr Norman, and everything else that a prosperous professor and his young wife might be expected to carry. A hiding place for all this gear was found by one, Jack Cooper.

As for the numerous documents required, McCallen saw to those. He had all the artists, letterers, wood carvers and ex-forgers in the camp working for him and, under his direction, they made perfect copies of German passports, police permits, &c., for all escapees who required them.

In this particular case, Mac got Geordie Nicol to prepare the passports, Sergt. McDougall (3rd Hussars) to prepare the University letter heads, and Charlie Kober to write out a letter of introduction to Vienna University in his finest Gothic script. Then there was the delicate little matter of the official stamps necessary to give the documents an authentic air.

Bill Jones made these. Now Bill Jones seems an improbable name for a genius, but what else can I call a man who, from the wood of T-squares, carves with old razor blades these beautiful eagles, swastikas and lettering on the wooden stamps before me?

Bill also made a fine job of the University of Copenhagen stamp, the joke about this effort being that neither Mac nor Bill had the foggiest notion what the actual University stamp might look like, but guessing that the German police wouldn't know either, decided to make an imaginary one. Irvine Poppa supplied plausible Latin for the lettering of this stamp, and the centre crest was a horse's head, which Bill copied from the badge of the Royal Army Veterinary Corps. The final result looked so

impressive that it's a great pity Copenhagen University didn't think of it first.

Now the actual escape method used by Norman and Eddie was the original idea of two Aussies, Steve Young and Ted Paton, of whom more anon, and briefly put was this:

The Red Cross Store inside the main camp, used for stacking Red Cross parcels and 'personal' parcels from home, was a big barn-like building which, from time to time, collected so much refuse in the form of paper packing, straw, &c., that the rubbish had to be cleared by fatigue parties of our own men. The method ordered by the Huns was that the refuse should be put into sacks and carried, under German escort, to a building outside the main camp, where it would be locked up by the guards pending the arrival of salvage lorries.

Here was the germ of an escape plan which was painstakingly developed. Experiments proved that a Kriegie in a sack could get into a sort of kneeling position, knees in one corner of the sack bottom, feet in the other, boots off and behind resting on heels, and that if paper and packing was stuffed into the sack with him, the outline of the body could be hidden.

Further experiments showed that, even on Stalag rations, 'he-men' could sling these sacks on their shoulders and carry them for long stretches without dropping down dead, and that if the fellow inside the sack was not exactly comfortable, he was usually still breathing after an hour or two's rehearsal - so that was okay.

Norman and Eddie practised this sack trick faithfully, and they also rehearsed another necessary detail. Granted that they reached the outside building in the sacks, they would still have to get out of the building, which was always locked. To this end, they used to go to the Camp Scout den, which was situated at one end of a building similar in design to the one outside the camp, and there they practised climbing up a beam and undoing the skylight which led on to the roof.

In between times, they were polishing up their Deutsch, studying maps, going over their kit, and, while Eddie was growing his hair and practising the walk and gestures of a girl, Norman was acquiring an impressively professorial manner and 'dealing' with Kriegies who were rude about his partner's coiffure.

The great day (May 19th, '44) dawned at last,

and the first job was to get their kit across to the Red Cross store, piece by piece, ready for packing into selected sacks, for they were naturally not wearing their man and wife finery until safely out of the camp.

Jerries were working in the store as usual that morning, and no Kriegies other than the regular staff were allowed inside, but, somehow or other, Norman and Eddie were smuggled in, too, and hidden from view behind piles of parcels until lunchtime, when the Germans locked the store up for an interval.

During this interval, a useful fellow named 'Topper' Brown, kidded the Huns that he had some essential 'overtime' to put in on his store work, so they obligingly locked him in, too, till after lunch. Topper was therefore able to plant Norman and Eddie in their sacks, pack 'em up nicely with paper and deposit their suitcase and kit in other sacks, recognizable by agreed markings.

When the Huns got back from their Kartoffels and Sauerkraut, they ordered a Kriegie fatigue party to pick up the sacks and, there happening to be a small cart available just then, to pile them on that instead of, as customary, carrying the refuse sacks all the way to the outside building.

As the cart creaked uncomfortably along, the fatigue party walking beside it to unload at the other end, Norman could see the Hun sentries who accompanied them through a slit in his sack. No doubt he wondered what it would feel like if one of the Huns stuck his bayonet experimentally into the sacks—a little habit of theirs when dealing, for instance, with carts of hay.

However, both the massive gates were safely passed, the sacks were duly unloaded by the British party into the outside building, which was locked up by the guards, and our two escapees managed, after half an hour or so, to get out of their sacks and bury themselves more comfortably till darkness fell.

Not till 10.30 at night were they able to climb up to the fanlight, get the window off its hinges, and start moving their kit out on to the roof. Progress was slow and not too easy on the nerves, because the searchlight from a nearby watch tower swept the roof every few minutes and the ugly spouts of Spandaus could splatter bullets over every inch of it. Also, there was a sentry

beat just below the building, and the lads had to time all their movements by the sound of his jack-boots.

By midnight, though, they had all their kit on the roof, the window safely back on its hinges, and Eddie in a position to move down to the edge of the roof, from whence he dropped into a ditch. Norman then lowered the kit down, bit by bit, and by 1 o'clock was able to join his partner in the ditch.

There followed a long and cautious crawl, punctuated by flat belly pauses as the searchlights played around them, but pushing their two haversacks and suitcase in front of them, they eventually got outside the immediate danger area and were able to make rapid walking progress towards the village of Hohenfels.

Dawn found them six to eight miles from the Stalag, and choosing a thick wood, they hid out for the whole of the day, hoping fervently that McCallen's system of covering up escapees on the morning roll call would not go amiss. An alarm so soon would be fatal.

When dusk lent its cloak they changed into their man and wife attire, buried their haversacks containing their uniforms and started on their walk to the railway station of Parsberg. A German civilian they met on the road exchanged 'guten Nacht' with them, which gave them confidence to inquire of him whether they were on the right route, and although they reached the stations hours too early for the local train and thought it best to retire to the woods for a while, Eddie made himself up again so perfectly that their eventual return to the station was a triumph.

The gaze of the first women they encountered displayed admiration, not suspicion, of the young couple, so there was no need to wonder whether the three piece ensemble and the coiffure were okay. French workers on the line gave Frau Eddie that ex-ray scrutiny they reserve for nice girls, and when a German kiddy to whom they had once given sweets sucked his thumb and stared at them without the least sign of recognition, they began to feel more comfortable.

Norman bought tickets for Regensburg without any difficulty and, arrived at this important junction, he now asked for first class tickets to Vienna. The booking clerk slammed them down in a manner which made them feel

homesick. Perhaps he'd served his apprenticeship in Blighty.

Everything was going splendidly so far, and the professor now bought the morning's *Völkische Beobachter* and conducted his lady to the train, which was soon racing the Danube to the city of Strauss and Freud.

During much of the 450 kilometre journey, the couple stood in the corridor, since they did not wish to chance either conversation in a crowded apartment, or a too noticeable silence. They found the newspaper a useful shield at times, but they could not pretend to be engrossed in its lying pages all the time and every now and then they cursed inwardly as some chatty Teuton or other tried to make conversation with them.

Still, these little ordeals were useful in their way. They gave practice in natural behaviour. After years and years inside barbed wire a man feels strange when first talking to the outside world. He feels stranger still if he happens to be masquerading as a girl wife, or a young professor, and has to chat to enemy strangers in their own tongue but with a Danish accent.

As the train drew in at one station, a loquacious passenger drew the pair's attention to another train alongside, which was being searched by the Gestapo, and the professor and his wife were prompt to agree how necessary it was to guard the Reich against its enemies. At the same time, Norman and Eddie braced themselves for a stiff test at Vienna station, where it seemed highly probable that there would be at least an examination of papers. An examination, too, by officials whose job it was to be suspicious of everybody.

But they missed this trial of nerves. When the train reached Vienna at 3 p.m., the professor and his wife just clutched their suitcase and handbag, respectively, surrendered their tickets at the barrier, and had no contact with officials, save when Norman sought the correct platform for the next stage of their journey – by underground.

The short tube ride to the Donau canal district of Vienna was marked by a strap-hanging conversation with a German *Wehrmacht* officer, who was no doubt proud of his perspicacity as he smilingly asked the young couple what part of Denmark they came from. Those

accent lessons from Irvine Poppa were paying a dividend now.

However, the lads, though grateful for their luck so far, were not disposed to crow. Till now their fortunes had been mainly in their own hands, but the next stage was wholly in the lap of the Gods. Everything depended upon their luck in making a contact – a contact who could help them on the next stage of bid for freedom. All that they had to go on was the description of a certain cafe and the tip that it was once used by an agent, or agents, friendly to the Allied cause. A gamble, nothing more – but a gamble well worth while.

After a good deal of careful 'recce' work, Norman and Eddie decided that one particular cafe more nearly answered the description given than any other, so they marched inside, sat down and ordered coffee.

Few people were about, the aged waiter was obviously not their man, and a female in the corner was far too much like an 'agent' to possibly be one, so the professor and his wife decided to return later in the evening and get a line on the types who normally used the place.

In the meantime, they felt a bit 'lost' wandering about the place with a suitcase, so they went to a cinema and enjoyed their first film show for four years.

It was about 6 o'clock when they returned to the cafe and the place was filling up. Just a typical little continental cafe, with a spot of faded plush, some large, once gilded mirrors, and a family clientele. Notices of the 'Walls have ears' type adorned the walls, enjoining patrons not to talk too freely, lest enemies of the Fatherland be listening.

And Eddie and Norman were listening. They were straining every nerve to try and catch some clue – some phrase which might provide a pointer to the place. Was this cafe, or was it not, the rendezvous they sought? They had to find out soon.

So Norman took a chance. Ordering more coffee and some *ersatz* bread and jam, he got into conversation with the cafe manager. He had been in Vienna before the *Anschluss* he told him. What did the manager think of conditions now?

Not much, apparently. Vienna was not the same gay place at all since the Germans came,

said the Austrian. In fact his private opinion was . . .

And he launched forth in such a manner that Norman and Eddie felt faint hopes stirring. It was a promising start, anyway, and, win or lose, they must follow it up. Which Norman did.

Did the manager, he asked, know where he and his wife could spend the night? And his tone and his gaze said more than that.

The Austrian stared at them silently. 'I'll send my wife to talk to you,' he said at last, his manner conspiratorial, tinged with a certain reserve.

Prepared for anything, the lads waited, knowing at least that the die was cast.

The manager went—and his wife came. She sat down at the table and chatted freely, her manner friendly as possible, and her talk more and more anti-Nazi as time went on. Norman gave her some chocolate—English chocolate. She took it without a flicker. Things seemed to be going well. Then . . .

Through the mirror Norman saw them. Squads of police outside the cafe, their helmets visible through the plate glass window. The next instant, three plain clothes men (Gestapo) burst in, flashing revolvers like Hollywood gangsters.

Commotion in the cafe . . . squeals from some women . . . a quick slip-away by their late companion . . . and the Gestapo closed in on the table, dramatic and trigger-nervous, the manager behind them.

There was one thing to do—and the lads did it. Up went their hands above their heads and, as per previous instructions, Norman said his piece.

'We're British soldiers . . . escaped prisoners of war,' he explained briefly. No sense in heroics now. They must just establish that they were not spies.

But it wasn't easy. 'Britische Soldaten, ja?' rasped the chief Hun ironically. 'And your woman is a soldier, too, I suppose? So, my friend, you think you deal with fools, do you!' and, in typical Hun fashion, he worked himself up, poking his Luger almost down Norman's throat and shouting question after question, while Norman could only keep his arms upstretched and repeat again and again that they were escaped soldiers and could prove it.

Eddie's attempt to end this farce with an

impatient movement towards his neck almost brought disaster, but though the Lügers swung round to cover him and the cafe patrons ducked apprehensively under tables, the Gestapo gallants finally tore open his 'blouse' to reveal—not a revolver, but a pair of false breasts.

Further sensation in cafe, followed by a certain calming down on the part of the Gestapo leader, who now conceived the bright idea that he could question them better elsewhere.

So, handcuffed together, and escorted by a large crowd, including some highly delighted youngsters, Norman and Eddie were marched through the streets to the nearest police station. Here they were able to produce their P.O.W. Stalag identification discs, and after a great deal of questioning it was grudgingly accepted that they might really be escaped British soldiers.

The attitude towards them improved slightly after this, but since they were locked up for the night in separate cells with their hands handcuffed behind their backs, it was not exactly matey. Early the next morning they were taken on to the main Vienna police station where they were questioned for hours on end by Army police, civilian detectives, Gestapo and several other varieties of human bloodhound.

The lads were grieved that they had had no chance to destroy their forged papers, particularly since they were told that these documents would have passed muster anywhere. A paper specialist at Gestapo headquarters examined them minutely for a long time before he convinced himself that they were not genuine German documents, stolen from somewhere; but no amount of questioning drew any information from Norman and Eddie. They just shrugged their shoulders and looked dumb.

What chiefly annoyed the German police was the thought of the great distance the lads had covered, but several *Wehrmacht* officers, who arrived at the station and asked to see the escapees, were quite sympathetic in tone. Realizing that it is a soldier's duty to try and escape from captivity, they expressed admiration for the ingenuity of the attempt.

Much to Eddie's disgust, they had to bear the gaze of girl typists at Gestapo Headquarters, but Norman told me that the open mouthed wonder and girlish giggles at Eddie's ensemble and coiffure were not unmixed with admiration. No doubt the smart professor also had his fans.

What both Norman and Eddie wanted far more than sympathizers, however, was something to eat; and the infamous Vienna Zuchthaus, to which they were taken next, was the wrong place for square meals.

Actually a remand prison for criminals, and a distribution centre for concentration camps, this unholy place was packed to overflowing with everything save comforts. Still in their smart attire, the lads were thrust into a small cell which already contained twenty-seven other captives.

There they were just left, day after day, with no clue as to their next move. There were twenty blankets to provide for twenty-nine men in the cell, and from five in the morning till eight at night, when they were given a palliasse to lie on, there was nothing to do save stand and wait and starve, the little bread and thin soup provided being 'extermination' diet.

It is typical of both lads that, when giving an account of their experiences, they would relate only that outline of their own story which I have put down here, but were full of tales about the Nazi's victims they met in jail – tales, alas, painfully familiar to the whole world now.

However, Norman and Eddie were not destined to rot in the Zuchthaus much longer. When the Hun police first contacted Stalag 383 they were told that no one was missing from the camp – a tribute, this, to the 'cover up' system on roll calls.

Later, though, when their fingerprints arrived at Hohenfels, Security Officer Blum was forced to admit that the birds had indeed flown from his cage, and when, through his own grapevine, McCallen sorrowfully heard that the lads had been picked up, he dispensed with the 'cover up' arrangements on roll call so that the next time the numbers were checked it was plainly disclosed that two men were 'away to the woods.'

It was deliciously comic to hear the various Huns responsible for counting us indulging in furious mutual recriminations as to which of them had been at fault in the previous miscounts, and since all sane men will agree that

Huns are never better employed than when abusing each other, no Kriegie minded that it cost us all a few extra hours on check parades.

A German N.C.O. and two men were now sent to Vienna to pick up the truants, and Norman and Eddie, after a full week in the stench of the Zuchthaus could breathe real air again on the way back to Hohenfels – the journey back taking them twenty-four hours, although they had done the first trip themselves in nine hours.

From Parsberg station they had to march the ten miles or more to the Stalag, and there were many open mouths amongst the locals who had seen the professor and his wife set out on their journey.

The 'three-piece ensemble' now looked like a 'Utility' model, and the shoes from Tubby Jaggers' mart were pinching painfully, but Keith Gadd's coiffure had survived the Zuchthaus and Eddie still looked more glamorous than most Frauleins as he and Norman grinningly acknowledged cheers from the few Kriegies who saw them return.

As for the professor's suit and ulster, there are fellows willing to swear that a certain Hun officer later wore them on his leave, but if so he must have had them cleaned, for – unromantic, but obvious to relate – both the professor and his wife were lousy after their stay in the Nazi jail.

The rest is soon told. The lads were taken to Blum, the Security Officer, who could not help being amused at their appearance. After hours of fruitless questioning as to how they got out, where the clothes and documents came from, &c., he gave it up as a bad job and sent them both to the bunker, which, though no boudoir, was certainly an improvement on the Zuchthaus. No sentence was ever passed on them, but they were kept in the cooler for fourteen days, anyway, and were then let out 'on licence.'

For months after the trip, the Gestapo were still asking questions about it; but, eventually, Professor Joe Stalin also made a trip to Vienna, and the Gestapo rather lost interest in earlier cases.

And nobody blamed them for that. Least of all, Norman and Eddie.

Digging before Victory

WHEN someone says to Michael McCallen: 'Four years a prisoner of war, eh! Damn dreary, wasn't it?' I can imagine Mac replying in that quiet way of his: 'Yes, it was rather a bore' - and changing the subject.

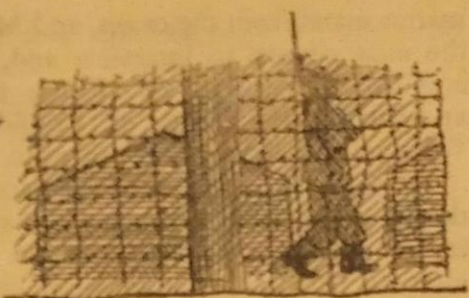
If he were to reply, instead, 'Dreary my foot! For me, personally, it was a life of constant scheming, dangerous action and fascinating suspense' he would be nearer the mark. Nearer the mark, but further from character.

The Hohenfels Scarlet Pimpernel once made an agreement with me at the Stalag. In return for my undertaking not to make notes about underground activities - notes which the snoops might pounce on - he would later give me some facts about his escapes organization, which helped dozens of men break out of the camp. Well, that agreement was faithfully kept by both parties, and Mac and I eventually met in a London cafe where he gave me those facts which, together with sidelights from other sources, I shall put down here.

But he told me precious little about his own exploits. He skimmed lightly, for instance, over those dangerous nights of wirecutting when, with searchlights sweeping the Stalag, with machine guns covering every yard, with 'shoot on sight' sentries patrolling the fence, he would lie for hours at a time, clipping away at the barbed wire barriers to cut a passage for escapees.

Instead, he said a great deal about his Kriegie helpers, who must absolve Mac and excuse me if I often have to omit names worthy of mention. What follows is a brief, factual account of escape work at 383. All the hopes, fears, thrills and suspense inseparable from prison breaks must be filled in by my readers, many of whom will be only too familiar with them.

The first big break-out scheme involved a tunnel. Badgie Opie, Chief Tunnelling Engineer Sam Floyd, men of Sam's own R.E. Tunnelling Company and a number of miners in the Stalag set to work in Hut 39 in Eight Company



lines, which was fairly near the fence in a position where trees and bushes might afford cover for an outlet.

Shovels were 'acquired' from a German store just outside the main camp and from sundry vehicles that came in with potatoes and other supplies. Props were made from bed boards and bed posts and later reinforced with the sides of Red Cross packing cases. The lighting problem was solved for a time by the aid of carbide lamps, but the fumes being pretty poisonous, Sam and his helpers made a tour of empty huts and unused latrines and brought in loads of electric fittings.

Ventilation, all-important in tunnel work, was first tackled by a home-made bellows, but as the tunnel crept nearer the fence this proved inadequate, so an ingenious fan contraption, worked by the motor of a Y.M.C.A. donated gramophone, was fitted up instead. This was a great improvement, but working conditions for the tunnellers were still pretty tough. Red Cross supplies were not coming through regularly at that time, and it took it out of a man to work for long in the underground shaft.

Fortunately, there was never any lack of willing helpers in this type of work, and men to watch for the snoops, others to cart away and distribute excavated earth in safe spots, &c., were soon enlisted from the ranks of would-be escapees. It proved impossible to keep the whole

matter secret from the camp, and McCallen was the man chosen to interview and, if possible, employ the services of all the fellows who approached the Man of Confidence, Alan Wiggins, Bill Baxter and others in the scheme.

No fewer than fifty men were to 'gallop' on the first 'Spring Handicap' as it was known, but far more than that were anxious to try their luck, so McCallen not only set up machinery to equip the lucky half hundred with all the manifold things they needed for the break, but he encouraged the others to keep 'escape minded' by arranging classes on the philosophy of escaping, and by giving them drill on practical matters connected with it.

Chief Scout, Ivan Stevens, willingly lent the Scout Den for these classes and every Monday and Tuesday evening nearly a hundred men gathered to hear lectures from men who had escaped from other camps and who could give shrewd tips on such matters as the type of kit to be carried, the best routes to take, &c. A motley collection of maps was produced, and lessons in map reading and compass work were given. Major Brook-Moore, the popular Aussie M.O., turned up on several occasions to give advice on health precautions and the gallopers were given every encouragement to study their business thoroughly.

Meanwhile, secret workshops were busy in odd corners of the Stalag, and a great race went on to keep equipment progress in line with the steady, foot-by-foot advance of the tunnel.

Great work the factories did, too! The tailors, for instance, working ten hours a day, often in John Rymer's band room, turned out a hundred suits and three overcoats in a few months. Made from German blankets supplied by prospective escapees, these suits were of all styles from lounge suits, double and single breasted, to plus fours and sports jacket outfits. The canvas needed for shaping the collars and lapels of coats came mainly from old mattress covers, filched from a Jerry store. The buttons and cottons were collected from all over the camp, and the linings for the suits were made out of old shirts. Proper fittings were given to the future wearers of these outfits, and narrow escapes from detection were the everyday lot of the tailors, who never allowed Hun searchers to put them off their work for long.

Sergt. H. G. MacKay, K.R.R.C. and Corpl.

Ben Woolsey, a Kiwi machine gunner, were two leading lights of a fine team who, working without machines and under jumpy conditions, turned out the goods. The suits they made were more than adequate for their purpose: they were damn good suits by civvy standards.

Another great team working for McCallen was engaged on making maps. Sergt. Blanco White, Jack Hamer and a group of Ordnance Cartographers were leased a special hut near the tunnel and, working at night, they produced some really fine maps for the gallopers. Compasses had to be produced, too, and Ted Hardman of the Black Watch undertook to make them. He utilized white bakelite covers from Gibbs' tooth paste tins, inserting a cardboard disc in the bottom portion with a gramophone needle, point upwards, to support the compass needle—a piece of razor blade cut to shape and magnetized with a small piece of tungsten magnet.

Then there were the documents. Delicate work, and a great deal of it, was needed on the fifty passports for the first entrants in the Spring Handicap. Jimmy Davies and Geordie Nicol forged these with criminal skill, and Tom Hodges was approached to supply the necessary photographs for the passports. Every Monday morning he had a queue of a dozen or so escapees, dressed in their civvy kit, waiting to 'smile and look pleasant' for the camera.

Such things as haversacks, groundsheets, and water bottles had to be made, scrounged or 'acquired' for all the gallopers, and there was also a heavy call upon cobblers to see that the boots were in stout order. The M.I. room chief, S./Sergt. Thomas, saw to it that each man was supplied with a field dressing, and he also donated water purifying tablets to the good cause.

As the great day drew near, and Sam's tunnelling team reached the finishing stages, McCallen was working day and night to co-ordinate all efforts and see that every galloper was properly equipped. It had been decided that each escapee should be provided with rations for fourteen days, and Geoff Hosking, an Aussie escapes enthusiast who had been made quartermaster for the Spring Handicap, conceived the idea of having these rations cooked in the form of cakes.

The Man of Confidence was approached and

he, in his usual imperturbable style, donated the rations from the very small reserve stocks available. A great night of cooking followed in No. 2 cookhouse, where John Hamilton and his men converted powdered biscuits, raisins, cocoa, cheese and sugar into cakes. These cakes were undoubtedly nourishing, but were not guaranteed to cure constipation.

All sorts of last minute hitches had to be ironed out. A passport photograph had not come out properly here, ten more sets of maps were needed there, the tailors ran out of blankets and had to make the last few suits out of old R.A.F. jackets, sportingly donated – and always the activities of snoops had to be ceaselessly countered by the scores of Kriegie look-outs. Nevertheless, although there was a decided undercurrent of excitement in the camp, not a trace of anything unusual was discovered by the Huns.

Sam Floyd's team had made a wonderful job of the tunnel. It ran for about 35 yards and came out some twenty feet from the sentry's beat on the far side of the fence, the mouth of the tunnel being just below the crest of a hillock and not far from a little clump of bushes.

A cavity about a yard square had to be made to allow the gallopers elbow room to get out, and the problem was how to conceal this cavity between the times each man went out – it being necessary, of course, that the men should go one by one. Well, a sort of trapdoor was made out of a yard square wooden frame and this was covered on its upper side with the grass sods that had been cut away from the surface. The trap worked on a hinge and was to be lifted upwards when a man went through, after which he would have to crawl on hands and knees, pushing his kit in front of him, till he reached the shelter of the bushes, from whence he would have to make a dash for the heavier cover of a conifer wood.

A series of chambers had been cut into the walls of the tunnel in which contact men were posted, whose job it would be to pass on orders from the controller at the mouth of the tunnel to the room up above, in which the men would assemble in small groups.

The underground lighting arrangements were excellent, and a system had been devised to carry heavy kit along the length of the tunnel by means of a sort of sledge drawn by a rope. Sergt.-Major Baxter had drawn up orders for conduct in the

tunnel which was approximately 2½ feet high and 2 feet wide.

On a certain Saturday night in March '43, while a play 'Someone at the Door' was being given at the Stalag theatre, the zero hour arrived. It was no fault of the actors in the stage thriller that many of their audience had their minds elsewhere.

Badgie Opie, Eddie Ramage and Bill Hake were the first Kriegies to crawl their way along the shaft. Two of them got away safely . . . then the trapdoor caved in – fortunately, without enough noise to attract the guards.

A short hold-up while McCallen and his colleagues took stock of the situation – and it was decided to carry on without the cover of the trapdoor. If the Hun sentries spotted the hole . . . well, it would be just too bad!

Mac went to the mouth of the tunnel and, taking up his post in the exit shaft, acted as look-out, passing word along when the next man had to go forward. It was not possible to keep all the guards under observation from his position, but scouts had been posted inside the camp to report sentry movements, and the signals of these scouts were transmitted along the tunnel by means of flashes on the electric light. One flash for 'all clear,' two for 'caution,' three for 'danger.' A piece of sacking, hung just outside the exit shaft, prevented any ray of light penetrating up above, and, naturally, all lights were switched off when one of the gallopers came through into the exit shaft.

So, slowly but surely, the exodus went on. Summoned in their twos and threes from their own huts, the escapees made their way stealthily to Hut 39 . . . were ushered down the cunningly camouflaged entrance trap . . . crawled along the tunnel, pulling their kit after them . . . and, at the word from McCallen, emerged from the exit shaft to the night – and fortune.

Often there were long intervals between departures, while a Hun sentry would stand about within a few feet of the gaping hole, and there was nothing for Mac to do but wait and hope and curse.

However, one, two, three, four . . . fourteen or fifteen men had slipped safely away, and two others were set to go before Mac received the three light flash for 'danger.' Three-quarters of an hour passed. Then one solitary flash announced the 'all clear.'

Mac gave the word to the sixteenth man. Over the top he went, and silently he vanished. Then the next man, Eric Domini, climbed through, picked up his kit – and, almost simultaneously ... BANG ... BANG ... and silence.

The first thing that occurred to Mac was that the tunnel had been ambushed; that the Huns had seen someone leaving the tunnel earlier, and had surrounded the exit. Directly after those shots, he expected that they would jump down into the tunnel and fire again, so he ordered a prompt withdrawal of the several men in the shaft.

Easier said than done. A bunch of men can't move smartly in a tunnel – especially with kit on and on the turn about – and Mac, himself, had to do a sort of hurdle race over discarded haversacks till he reached the first bend in the tunnel, where he would be safe from the opening volley.

But ... no volley came. Safely back in Hut 39, Mac and the others found that the surplus population had wisely vanished when they heard the shots, but that the actual occupants of the room (old Sam Floyd included) were 'staying put' and did not appear to be at all perturbed. They were discussing a Sergt.-Major's hat.

Expecting a lightning search for stray Kriegies, Mac and the other visitors now made haste to their respective huts and vied quickly into bed, and, from his own bunk in an Eight Company hut near the fence, Mac presently saw the search-lights focusing on a little group outside. It was two of the gallopers being marched away by a trio of Huns, who were keeping their Tommy guns trained on them.

Oddly enough, though, apart from a number of jabbering Jerries visiting the spot where the gallopers had been picked up, nothing else happened that night. It was not till dawn that the Huns found the actual hole, and then one of them climbed down it, crawled along the shaft and emerged through the floorboards in Hut 39.

What a to-do followed! The Kommandant was sent for, his face a study in purple. The occupants of the room were turned out and the complete floorboards taken up – but the Huns didn't get all the equipment since Sam Floyd had already removed the electrical fittings to a place of safety where they could await use on the next job.

This was a blessing. A greater one was that the two gallopers picked up were unharmed. The guards had fired at Eric Domini from short range, but had missed him by inches – which was enough. There was a long, long check parade for the whole camp that Sunday morning, but it was weeks before the last of the gallopers who had got away were recaptured in various parts of the Reich.

This coup obviously shook Jerry – especially as the escapees were found to have such splendid outfits and documents – and one sequel was the posting to the Stalag of a team of six special snoops, headed by the infamous Mr. Moto, the job of these ferrets being to go through the huts with a tooth comb – especially those huts near the fence.

Highly business-like were these searches. No Kriegie would be allowed to enter or leave any room in the block being searched, and the snoops would take their time to give each hut a thorough going-over. Kit would be opened up, mattresses rifled, boots examined, tins turned out, washing on the lines pulled down, and the floorboards lifted while the damp course of glass wool and waterproof felting between the double floors was thoroughly prodded for concealed articles.

In the course of a long and dishonourable career, Moto and Co. found plenty of contraband, ranging from radios and cameras to arms and ammunition – but what they didn't find was the main gear of the escapes organization.

To anticipate a little, it may be said that McCallen, by means which cannot be revealed, eventually received from England a great deal of highly valuable escapes kit. This included stacks of maps, compasses, photographic material, wire clippers of every size and shape, dies, drawing material, civilian clothes and hats – everything, in fact, which had previously had to be made in the secret workshops of the Stalag.

Now it was of high importance that the Huns should not find this kit – not only because of its great intrinsic utility, but because it would at once be recognized as of British origin.

McCallen and his chief digger, Alan Clarke, therefore got busy. Breaking into an empty hut – room 143, Ten Company – they lifted the floorboards and dug a huge cavity in the ground beneath. Into this cavity they sunk two big ply-

wood boxes which had once held Canadian Red Cross parcels, and into these boxes they crammed all the civvy suits the tailors had made, and some of the stuff from Blighty, the boxes then being camouflaged with a layer of soil. This underground wardrobe served its purpose and is probably still intact to this day, although the hut was later occupied by Jimmy Davies and other Kriegies.

Another hiding place for smaller articles was made in the latrine behind the school. Ex-patrons of this social centre will remember that there was a partition down the middle supporting troughs on either side. This partition, which did not reach to the roof, being constructed of two parallel rows of planks. It occurred to McCallen that between these planks there would be excellent cupboard space, so with Alan Clarke and Chief Middlemore he attacked it one night with hacksaw blades.

They cut away one of the planks halfway up and, releasing the nails that held it fast to the horizontal beams running along inside, found that by sliding the cut-away portion upwards (it was tongue and grooved) they had an extensive space at their disposal. There was nothing to show that the partition had been tampered with, because the crosscut in the upright plank was hidden by the metal trough, and the only snag to an ideal hiding place was that the establishment was so well patronized that they often had to wait till after midnight before they could get at their cupboard in secret.

Apart from these permanent hiding places, it was always necessary to have temporary ones where stuff could be stowed away, or got at, quickly. Mac therefore records his thanks to the occupants of rooms 69 and 73 for an act of self-sacrifice only to be really appreciated by those who endured the winters of Hohenfels. They forbore from burning their under floor boards and, right to the end, Mac could temporarily slip his precious gear between their double floors.

As for his own hut, there was nearly always *verboten* material tucked away in his boots, mattress and elsewhere, but the only haul the snoops ever made was a packet of German photographic paper, which was small compensation for missing the three civvy suits concealed in a paliasse that they only half rifled.

McCallen heard nothing more about that paper, which was surprising, since, when ex-

posed, it would have shown photostat copies of some perfect maps, covering all the area from Hohenfels to the Swiss border.

This photostat map making was a constant occupation of the escapes expert, who turned out many hundreds of copies from original maps on rice paper. In an earlier chapter I have mentioned the underground secret chamber in the Scout Den, used as a radio listening post. Its ceiling was two and a half feet below the floor and its eight foot by eight foot space was utilized also as a dark room during the six months or so that it remained undiscovered.

Later, McCallen was obliged to rig up a dark room in his own hut, which he did by suspending a blanket from the bunk above his own and working on his bed, borrowing his hutmates' soup bowls for rinsing and developing the prints.

One big job in the photographic line was to produce copies of all sorts of maps to issue to Company Commanders and Warrant Officers in the event of the Huns marching us to another camp, the idea being to distribute the maps in case there was an opportunity of making a *break en route*.

This job involved the production of eight hundred different prints, and Mac had to take a chance and hang them up to dry in rows all over his own room. His pals cheerfully put up with the drippings down their necks and pretended not to notice that he was making maps. They must have chuckled, though, over a typical Stalag rumour that developed about Mac's activities.

In order to cope with this big printing order he was obliged to borrow from the cookhouse three huge frying trays which, being enamelled, were ideal for photographic work. To avoid even the appearance of evil, Mac used to collect these trays at night, but on one or two occasions he was forced to return them during daylight, with the result that anti-racket busybodies passed the word round that he was making cakes to flog on the marts!

However, enough has been written to show that plenty of hard work and midnight oil were involved in escapes 'staff work' and that those gallopers who sought Mac's aid could rely upon his organization to equip them properly. Now to see how the gallopers set about getting out of the camp and making use of all this kit.

Tunnels are fascinating things - though easier

to read about than dig – and it is not to be supposed that the rumbling of the Hut 39 shaft stopped work on other tubes. On the contrary, every hut within striking distance of the fence seemed to be stretching out underground arms, and the whole place became such a rabbit warren that it's a wonder we weren't all undermined and buried – Kriegies, Huns and all!

Some of these tunnels were so ingeniously concealed that you couldn't find them even if you were invited to inspect the hut. One in room 20, a few doors from me, had its entrance in the tiny porch between two doors, and it was quite impossible to detect where the trap had been made. This tunnel was designed to go right beneath the Hun administrative offices, the other side of the wire, and could truly said to be 'under the Kommandant's nose.'

Nine Company had another tube in No. 1 Hut and also one in the latrine, which was very near the fence at a point where thick foliage was close. A Hun watchtower loomed gauntly above the unæsthetic architecture of the latrine, and a sentry beat nearby proved that Jerry realized that this was a likely spot for an attempted break. As the earth was excavated from this tunnel it was distributed and flattened down under the duck boarding which formed the floor of the latrine, with the amusing result that customers found their heads getting nearer the roof each day. In fact, a visit there might be called an 'uplifting experience.'

Two Company had a tunnel in the Spaniards' room and another in the next row of huts towards the bunker. Tuggle Heath and Phil Meikle started one of their own in One Company, and the lads of Six Company chose the wash-house in the company lines as a good place to start burrowing.

There were at least two tunnels in Five Company, that in room 263 being a particularly ambitious effort. It had a cement floor – the cement being lifted from stocks near the ironically termed 'swimming pool' – and it was well staved up with packing-case wood, adequately lighted by electricity, and had its entrance trap concealed by a dummy oven.

This tunnel was twelve feet beneath the surface and was planned to run to eighty feet in length. Despite being able to work only at night, when the electric current was on, the lads finished more than half in six weeks, and would have

been even quicker, but for the handicap of constant wet in the tunnel.

One night in June, Corpl. Alan Morrison, A.I.F., descended the twelve-foot entrance shaft, crawled along the tunnel and got busy with his shovel. He was very unlucky – and decidedly fortunate. Unlucky that the tunnel roof collapsed and buried him; fortunate to be only seven-eighths suffocated when his room mates dug him out, after five or ten minutes of pretty desperate shovelling.

Next afternoon by 2 p.m. there was water two foot deep around the hut. Away came the oven . . . up went the tunnel trap – and the worst was known. The water was up to floor board level and it was obvious to one and all that a main water pipe had burst. Fred Stuckey, a Kiwi, paused only to contribute his fair share of language about this. Then he stripped off, dived into the tunnel, and by submarine feats possible only to New Zealanders rescued the electrical fittings. This act was generally considered more praiseworthy than the previous day's rescue of Alan, since there was a greater shortage of electric light fittings than of Aussie escape enthusiasts in the camp.

However, once this gear was safely away, the Jerries had to be called in to deal with the flood situation. They got a bit nasty when told to work out for themselves what had happened, but all their wild accusations about *ein tunnel* were met only with shoulder shrugs, or bland speculations as to whether the previous occupants of the camp, Serbian officers, could have dug it.

What accorded some satisfaction to the Huns, though, was that the Kriegies of Hut 263 had to continue living in the place, which now resembled Noah's Ark, and it was a fact that the next week or two, with walls down and floor up, proved more uncomfortable than that stay in the bunker the lads had expected.

Talking of the bunker – which was a building just outside the Stalag, and just about that time was housing a Russian officer escapee from another camp who was awaiting execution for the alleged killing of a Hun guard – it was later the site of a tunnel started by one of the Stalag's most gallant gallopers – W/O Tadeusz Baronowski.

This Polish 'Battle of Britain' pilot, holder of the Polish D.F.C., was shot down over Brest and, when brought to Hohenfels, soon became

familiar with the bunker for his attempts to escape. While doing one of these stretches, Baron managed to raise the floorboards of his bare, whitewashed cell and start a tunnel with his pocket knife!

Now, it is related elsewhere how McCallen and others used to smuggle in food and cigarettes to the bunker. Suffice it to say here that at the time Baron was doing this particular stretch the bunker guards were rather sociable and used to let the cell occupants into the guard-room every evening to make tea and have a smoke. In fact, these Jerries were gracious enough to accept cups of tea and cigarettes for themselves, too, and their preoccupation gave Baron and other bunkerites a chance to get really cracking underneath the floorboards.

They soon completed the short, rough tunnel necessary to take them under the wire, and McCallen was then contacted to try and get some escapes kit through for the prospective gallopers, who included Bill Jones and little Friedman.

This was a bit of a poser for Mac, since at that time everybody going to the bunker was searched twice – once at the main gate of the Stalag, and again on arrival at the gaol. However, choosing a certain Sunday when the regular searchers were not on duty and an issue of soup was to supplement the usual dry bread and water diet, Mac enlisted the services of the Kriegie whose job it would be to carry the soup from the Stalag cookhouse to the bunker.

This lad made two or three trips and succeeded in getting all the necessary gear across. Overalls to be worn by the gallopers he concealed under his own uniform. Tins of food were dropped into the soup, and money and compasses were hidden in his socks. Everything, in fact, seemed set for a triumph, so it was the sheerest cussedness of fortune that a German specialist searcher happened to visit the gaol that afternoon and to observe that the floorboards were not secure. Even then, he never probed further to discover the tunnel, but merely had the boards nailed down again – and since subsequent bunkerites

never had an opportunity of getting at it, Baronowski's tunnel is quite possibly intact to this day.

If so it is probably the last of the network; for it must now be recorded that, after the room 39 affair, no gallopers actually left the camp by the tube route, but that, one after another, the tunnels were discovered and filled in by the Jerries.

But was this a triumph for the Hun? Not at all. Right from that very first breakout, the Kommandant was forced to apply for extra snoops and guards and dogs – which, in itself, justified the Kriegies' sweat. Then, although the use of special sound detector apparatus enabled snoops to pounce on many tunnels, they were never too confident about the use of this apparatus, since they were always being led on wild-goose chases by jokers who dug especially for the benefit of the detector. Apart from this, there were tunnels like that water flooded one in Hut 263 which owed their discovery to chance, not science, and the Kommandant was always worried lest he wake up one morning to find that the twentieth or twenty-first tunnel had carried away half his charges.

So, one way and another, the tunnels probably cost the Huns more sweat than they did the Kriegies, and no man who swung a shovel need deem it wasted effort.

But I am glad, all the same, that the tunnels were mere sidelines. Mere sidelines, that is, of the Gallopers Club. McCallen would be the first to congratulate those Kriegies who dug and hewed so doggedly, despite the odds; but, after the Hut 39 effort had put the Huns on their guard, Mac and his colleagues regarded the tunnels more as useful distracters of Jerry attention than as likely avenues to the world outside, and they ceaselessly sought for other means of escape.

That they did not seek in vain, and that their plots and plans, their dodges and deeds were a permanent pain to the Huns is part of Hohenfels' history.

I shall rejoice to record that history in the following chapter.

Damned Dangerous Sport

PERHAPS the most sincere tribute ever paid to the Hohenfels Gallopers was the official German threat to murder them.

This threat was embodied in lurid posters and handbills distributed through the Stalag. 'Escaping is a damned dangerous Sport!' the posters warned and, quoting from an alleged secret British order about sabotage in enemy territory (an order supposedly addressed to Commando groups), they claimed that this absolved the Reich from treating escaped prisoners of war as soldiers and gave it the right to put to death as 'gangsters and saboteurs' any escapees found in certain 'Defence Areas.'

Stalag 383 was plumb in the middle of one such sacred zone, it seemed, and the posters, in blood-red letters, warned again: 'Stay in the Stalag where you will be safe. Otherwise, *you will certainly lose your life.*'

Now, the only time when it is not necessary to doubt a Nazi's word is when he is promising to do something murderous; and, since we knew all about the then recent butchery of fifty RAF Officers from Luft. III in Bavaria, there was no reason to suppose that the posters were printed as a bluff: no reason to doubt that the local werewolves were whetting their knives.

Nevertheless, so far from discouraging would-be members of the Gallopers Club, McCallen told me that his always lengthy waiting list was rather extended by the posters. They did, at least, advertise that the Huns were getting rattled, and that the Gallopers had not just wasted time, and the only pity was that the gauntlet was flung down at so late a stage in the war. Like a character I remember in a Will Hay film, many of the new Gallopers were released before they had time to escape and were inclined to be a bit peeved about it. They'll have to be prisoners in another war before they can test their deep-laid plans.

Which reminds me that it is no part of my purpose to 'blow the gaff' on anything that might assist future gaolers of British prisoners, so if the following brief outline of escapes from



383 contains unexplained phenomena, just assume, as you did about that last illusionist's show you saw, that it was 'all done by mirrors.' Better still, write to Michael McCallen and ask him to put his experiences in complete book form, meanwhile being satisfied with this, his own draft version of escape activities.

Michael McCallen speaking: There were many escapes from Stalag 383 – some through the fence, others via the sacks that carried out the waste wrappings from personal parcels, some by dressing up as civilian workers and going out of the gate on the sports field when the new huts were being built. Then some escaped at night time, going through both main gates dressed as German Feldwebels, as was done by George Beeson and Ginger Suggit; and a few got out by lying in a grave until the sports field was locked at night and then getting through the single fence at the South West side of the camp.

A less spectacular way was to 'take a walk' off one of the fatigue parties, though this wasn't very popular with the camp authorities since it tended to jeopardize vital supplies, especially in periods of shortage. One man put on his home-made civvies under his uniform and trailed off the hospital party outside the camp, but was in the clink within a few minutes, being detected by accompanying guards.

The bath house sometimes proved a means of escape – I am thinking now of the effort made by Lennard and Wilkinson who, with the help of their friends, smuggled their kit out with them on the bath party (the baths being some distance

outside the Stalag gates) and made their escape through the window high up in the wall at the rear of the bath house. Lennard was dressed in German uniform, his rucksack slung carelessly over his shoulder, and avoiding the scrutiny of the German guard in charge of the party he ambled up to the Kommandatur, picked up a bike that was standing there and peddled off. I think it was near Munich that he was gathered in again.

I remember, too, a jolly good performance by Phil Meikle and his men, which involved throwing a ladder against the fence and a gang plank across to the outer fence (forming a bridge) as a means of escape. To divert attention, a dummy figure was thrown up on the fence wall away from the base of operations, and then the lights of the perimeter were fused (by means of a length of cord, a small stone at either end, being slung up over the electric cable that ran round the camp, and causing both positive and negative to meet, thus causing a short). But the Hun made too much of a hullabaloo for the operation to be a success and no one, I think, got out, though I've an idea that Tuggles Heath went into the bunker as a consequence of it.

Talking of the bunker, when the majority of the men who had gone through the first tunnel were captured and put into clink, the Hun put them on bread and water and they only had soup every third day. So we contrived to get Red Cross food into them. At first this was thrown across from the camp to the bunker, which was just on the other side of the road running round our camp; but the sentry objected too strongly to this and another means had to be devised. We knew that the Huns in the prison were often amenable to bribes, so one day, when there was a soup issue, Slim Somerville, a Kiwi (who had spent a long time with the guerillas in Greece), and myself, took around the jugs with a German escort, and tried as discreetly as we could to get the Germans to take in the tins of food we had secreted in our jackets.

But it so happened that an Unteroffizier was there, so the guards wouldn't play. Slim engaged them in conversation while I turned my back and dropped a few tins of odds and ends into the jug of soup in the hope that our men would fish them out when the soups were taken to their cells. Unfortunately, the guards chose to examine the soup before they took it along

to the cells and, of course, found the tins, with the result that the Kommandant was informed and rewarded Slim and me with three days each for our pains.

I must say something of two determined gallopers - George Beeson and Ginger Suggit. I don't think there were two men of greater initiative in the camp than these men. Beeson had started a tunnel in the Spaniards' room in Number Two Company and had succeeded for a long time in doing what others had failed to do - keep it quiet. Not until a few days before it was due to be used did I know of it, and the very night prior to the escape attempt the Huns dropped on it. But George didn't give up. It wasn't long before he got together the makings of a German uniform, and joined in with Ginger Suggit to get out of the camp as Germans. One of the uniforms, I believe, was made of an Australian jacket dyed to the appropriate shade of green-blue, with silver paper sewn around the collar and epaulettes to indicate rank, dummy pips, war ribbons made to colour on strips of cardboard pinned on the breasts, and belts made from the cardboard of Red Cross boxes, darkened with black boot polish. Their equipment extended even to dummy pistols, and Ginger made up the passes which gave them their German identity and permission to enter and leave the camp. Both could speak German fluently, and one dark night they walked calmly through the two main gates, receiving respectful salutes from the guards. Their excursion came to grief at Stuttgart.

George Beeson was instrumental in bringing into the camp a number of French P.O.W.s from the French Lager across the road from our camp. He had heard that the French had a good system for getting men across the Rhine into France, and so that he could negotiate in the best way he smuggled himself into the French camp to see their camp leader about getting a place in his list of prospective escapees. The arrangements he made were that five of our men (I think that was the number) should change places with the same number of Frenchmen, the conspirators exchanging identities completely. It was the idea to have our men sent out on French working parties to facilitate their departure via the French route.

For this job our men needed a stack of commodities, both for their own personal

requirements and for bribery and reward on their journey. Old Mac (MacKenzie, the 383 camp leader) didn't so much as blink an eyelid when I presented the terrific list of stuff required from the Red Cross store. It included biscuits, chocolate, cocoa, coffee, soap and cigarettes, and German money. But the stuff was there, as was the clothing some of the men required. Transportation of all that stuff to the other camp tended to be a difficult problem, but it was gradually convoyed across with the help of Doug Farley and Topper Brown, and George Beeson was the first 383 man to change over to the French Lager. In his place came Wally Whitehead, a Glasgow born man, living in Paris with his French wife. Wally came in one day with the refuse cart which was manned by Frenchmen, and the change over was not difficult, George taking his place in the cart for the return journey to the French camp, and the German guard in charge choosing to see nothing.

George was soon followed by Ted Hardman; but something went wrong with the works when George made his break from the French camp and was picked up by Huns, for checking up respective strengths of the two camps they probably suspected that Stalag 383 must be harbouring a Frenchman, otherwise our number, and not the French, would have been reduced by one.

However, this was a puzzle that they never solved, for Wally went into hiding in the camp when a man by man check of the Hohenfels inmates was ordered, and they could only conclude that they had been tricked into a false count before. Eventually, we had five Frenchmen surplus to our strength living in the camp, but hiding during most roll calls. Thus it was that three men, say, could make a break from Hohenfels and not be detected at the next count, for it was only necessary to get three of the Frenchmen to take their places and the numbers were correct. It was not until gallopers were picked up in different parts of the Reich and traced as belonging to Stalag 383 (like Norman and Eddie on their Vienna trip) that the Kommandant would order a recount, and by that time the Froggies would be safely concealed once more.

Sore perplexed by all this mystery, the Huns made several rigid checks of the camp strength,

going through the cards containing photographs and fingerprints and, at the same time, sending squads of guards to search the camp while all prisoners were supposed to be safely locked in the parade ground enclosure. The Frenchmen spent countless hours lying in the most uncomfortable places, often (too often, I'm afraid) under huts on water-sodden ground, and sometimes under the potatoes in the cellar of the cookhouse. Wherever they were, they always eluded the Hun. Vividly do I recall one morning when the Germans brought in their dogs unexpectedly while we were still on parade and made a thorough search of the camp. They prodded under huts, searched each separate one, and combed the bigger buildings, including the two cookhouses. But they grew tired as they reached the last cellar in the last cookhouse – and skipped it – and the Frenchmen, too.

During the great food shortage, the Froggies, who were surplus to camp strength, had to take pot luck with their rations from the cookhouse, but they were always fixed up somehow, and in normal times MacKenzie saw to it that they got the Red Cross issues like the rest of us. The Frenchmen were usually busy men in the daytime – some ran stalls, and Wally Whitehead conducted French classes in the school – but they avoided contact with their friends from the other camp, lest the Germans had the French fatigue parties under observation. Wally, Marcel, John, Charlie, Morris, thank you. You did a great job. I hope you will be rewarded.

One of the Gallopers' escape methods that was both clever and amusing made use of the swill tub. Every morning at 383 a collection of refuse was made from the two cookhouses, the swill being carted away to a farm in the district. The contraption used for collecting the refuse consisted of a huge iron barrel, about four feet high and three in diameter, mounted on two iron wheels and drawn by an old mare in charge of a rather dopey-looking civilian. The tub had a huge lid which rattled merrily as the mare progressed along the camp roads, which were anything but tarmacked. Indeed, the lid sometimes bounced so high that it tended to come back too late to go into the tub.

However, two Kriegies, Ned Lynch and Bob Jordan, made their observations on the routine of this vehicle and decided that it would be worth experimenting with as a route to the out-

side world. So the first man was assembled with all his kit in a point of vantage near Number Two Cookhouse one fine morning, and while the guard's back was turned, into the tub he goes, disregarding, as far as possible, the odious contents thereof, and dragging his kit after him, leaving Ned Lynch to discreetly replace the lid.

The swill had, of course, been collected by then, so the tub moved slowly off towards the gates. Many hearts missed a beat when the tub perambulated past the guard on the first gate and slowly rumbled up to the second, outside gate. Here again there were tense moments, but the cart passed on triumphantly, for evidently no snoop ever suspected that such a vehicle would be selected as a means of getting out of the camp. So the swill tub rattled up the road, the man in charge idly flicking away flies with his whip, and at an opportune moment, when a good distance away from the Stalag, Bob Jordan silently raised himself out of the tub and made for cover, his footsteps drowned by the din of the iron wheels and the clanging of the loose lid.

This performance was repeated several times, but it had to go wrong in the end, and on the last occasion, as the tub reached the second gate, six snoops formed a circle round it and gaily lifted the lid. Up jumped the escapee like a jack-in-the-box and who was the more surprised it would be difficult to say, for despite their preparedness the Huns seemed genuinely startled at their haul. The would-be galloper got fourteen days for his effort.

Two Australians, Steve Young and Ted Paton, were the originators of the method of escape via sacks (the method that was used so successfully by the two lads who got to Vienna) and both these Aussies were at large for some time after putting their brainwave into practice. They made other breaks later on, Steve dressing up in civilian clothes, making up his face, and walking out of the gate on the sports field armed with a forged civvie pass. The last I heard of Steve was a card from him talking about 'Nights in Bucharest.'

The sports field was opened in the Spring of '44, and the very day it opened some of our Gallopers got together and worked out a scheme to use it as an escape route. Actually, I had been given the idea some months before by B.S.M. Flood - and it was this.

The field was rectangular in shape and, since we were only allowed in it during hours of daylight, was provided with single barbed wire fencing instead of the usual double fences. Well, it was Sergt.-Major Flood's idea to get a party of men to sunbathe all in a group, blankets and overcoats stretched out under them, and while the sentries' attention was diverted, for several of them to cut away the earth with sharp knives and to fill the pockets of the coats and also the sleeves (which had been sewn together at the ends) with the loose soil thus removed.

A sort of grave was thus to be dug and a wooden frame inserted to support the grass sods which were to be replaced to camouflage the cavity. At night, as the sports field was being cleared and locked up by the Huns, a man would conceal himself in the 'grave' and leave his friends to replace the wooden frame. Then, waiting until darkness fell, he would let himself out into the deserted field, replace the cover of the grave, make his way to the single barbed wire fence and cut his way through with our special wire cutters. Before making his dash for the woods, he was to repair the gap in the fence so that the method of exit would not be discovered. We had worked out details as to the method of introducing the necessary tools and timber, and B.S.M. Flood, though keen to get away himself, was prepared to let other men on the Gallopers waiting list try their luck first.

I gathered a group of men together who were to do the job and, while making a recco of the field on the first day of opening, I noticed another group of men whose very presence there hinted that something was brewing. Investigation showed that they were working on the same plan as my own fellows, so we decided to join forces and make a job of it.

That method of breaking camp proved successful on several occasions, but eventually one of the Gallopers was caught cutting his way through the fence, so the Huns went over the field with a tooth comb until they discovered the camouflaged grave. From then on, of course, the sports field was never closed at night without a search being made, and trained dogs were fetched in to round up any stay-behinds. A pity, really, because that idea might have provided a regular means of exit.

The escapes activity at 383 used to give the Kommandant a bad headache, and he tried to

counteract it by placing all known escapees in three rooms where they could be constantly under the supervision of snoops, while on roll call they always had to stand at the end of their company lines so that they could be quickly checked.

Men I remember in these marked rooms included Fred Stuckey, Ginger Suggit, George Beeson, Archie McKee, Bert Howe, Bob Jordan, Ned Lynch, Ted Hardman and Alex Shelton in Hut 201. Les Murname, Eddie Ramage, Jock Ryan and his brother (alias Winton and Darwin), Fred Courtney, Bob Wilkie and Hughie Grieg, Sid Buttons, Bill Hake and Ted Ainslow in Hut 170. Lofty Williams, an Aussie, Eric Domini, Percy Sekine, Dick Pacey, Geoff Spence, Henry Hall, Tuggles Heath and Bill Opie in Hut 171, and I think Baronowski was there, too.

Anyway, all these men had three, four or more escapes to their credit, and the Hun thought he would be safer by boarding them all together. Needless to say, the snoops called in at these special huts every day at first, so not much could be done in the way of tracing maps and making escape preparations. But this much was done—one day the three huts put their heads together and twenty of them formed a 'potato party' to go out to the clamps half a mile away from the camp and try a mass escape from there.

The scheme was planned on short notice, and all those men had to be given the usual rations, maps, compasses, money and, in a few cases, civilian clothes. Anyway, they were all equipped satisfactorily, and they paraded at the gates at two o'clock and were placed in charge of the German guards who led them away. Now, normally they would not have stood a chance of being allowed out on a fatigue party, being so well known, but it just happened that the Germans on the outside gate who checked out the potato party were new to the Stalag and didn't recognize them. It was luck, too, that they got by with all their kit, although haversacks were often worn by genuine potato gatherers who liked to bring back a few goods racketeered from Jerry civilians.

However, the party reached the clamps, did a little work, and when the guards and other Jerries working around had been drawn into bargaining for cigarettes, etc., by the men who

BARBED WIRE
were not scheduled to escape, the Gallopers slipped away one by one till no fewer than fourteen of them had hit the trail.

It took weeks for the Huns to round them all up again, and the fact of these being marked men before the episode was probably what infuriated the Germans most. The night of the escape, the Huns switched off all the Stalag lights as a sort of token retaliation against the camp and, needless to say, all parties leaving the cage from then on were very rigidly searched—until, as usual, the searchers became dilatory again.

At one time, we had five officers in the camp who had come to Hohenfels for the specific purpose of escaping. They had a long time to wait before their turn on the escapes roster came up, but eventually they were all fitted up with the necessary gear, rations and papers, and while two of them elected to try a flit from an unloading party at Parsberg station, the other group of three tried the method of escaping through sacks from the Red Cross store. Of the two who got away at Parsberg, one was soon picked up by the many German patrols, but the other, an Australian officer, managed to lift a bike from somewhere and gave the Jerries a very good run for their money. The three officers who exited via the sacks were rather unlucky in that a group of French prisoners had escaped the same day and the district was completely cordoned off by the Huns. All these officers were eventually returned to their Oflags after doing time for their escape attempts.

One of the commonest means of exit at 383 was the direct route through the barbed wire after it had been cut with the clippers, and I did my first job at fence cutting at Hohenfels soon after the Stalag opened in the Autumn of 1942.

McKibbin speaking: Here I must take over from McCallen, who skims so lightly over his own exploits that his narrative gives scant idea of the actual risks he ran.

For this wire cutting business was a risky game indeed. It was a direct challenge to the German guards; it cocked a snoop at Hun efficiency; and it alarmed and infuriated all those charged with the prisoners' custody. They were hell bent to stop it.

Consider this. On all sides the Stalag was surrounded by great double fences of thick

barbed wire, the corridor between the fences being sewn with spiteful coiled masses of denham wire embedded in the earth. Overlooking every yard of the camp were five lofty watchtowers, always manned. They had searchlights and machine guns to command the camp. Then, at intervals of thirty yards outside the wire, Hun sentries patrolled all night, a chain of high-hung lamps round the camp perimeter keeping the fence illuminated. Inside the wire, snoops with dogs were on the prowl—no prisoner being allowed to leave his hut at night, save for necessary journeys. So alert were the searchlight controllers that a beam nearly always picked up the night walkers and followed their course to the latrine, obligingly lighting the route back again, too.

Despite all this—despite every aid to gaol keeping that the Kommandant could desire—time after time, both winter and summer, the fences were breached and escapes made through the wire. As often as not, the fence was patched up after the exit, and it was not until escapees were picked up in odd corners of the Reich that search revealed where the gap had been cut.

Imagine, then, the fury of the Huns; their fault-placing inquiries, their bitter recriminations, the oaths and vows of their snoops. Imagine, too, the orders to the guards, and the murderous zeal with which these clenched their rifles—and then you will appreciate the nerve of the cutters.

It was a slow job, that cutting, but not a dull one. For hours and hours on end, in all sorts of weather, McCallen would lie out at the fence, clipping away here, crouching behind a post there, watching the jackboots of the nearest guard, keeping an eye on the sweeping searchlights, and listening for the whispers of his own scouts, placed to warn him of approaching snoops.

Every job was planned with willing helpers. A daylight reconnaissance would select the spot to be attacked. The expectant escapees would be warned to stand by and a hut near the proposed gap would be chosen as headquarters. Posted in the passages between huts, scouts would give warning of snoops within the camp, while others would keep tag on the outside sentries' movements. Great help was given by our own camp police, Tim Madden and his men keeping watch on certain roads.

But no amount of co-operation could rid the job of risk, and after all the planning it was largely luck that counted; Luck and the coolness of the fellow at the fence.

On his first attempt to breach the wire, McCallen was unlucky. Four or five hours with the clippers was not enough to clear away the coiled wire between the fences, and the idea, later used, of making a sort of bridge across the obstacle with matting was unworkable in this case, because the denham wire was far too high. So Mac repaired the damage he had done to the inner fence, and another spot was chosen for the next night's attempt.

All at 383 will remember the disused double gates near the bunker, and it was this spot which was selected for the second try, the last hut on the left of the main road being chosen for headquarters. Paddy McKenna and John MacKay lived there at the time and also included in Mac's party were Bill Baxter, Geoff Hosking, Jack Hamer, Alan Clarke and Eddie Ramage.

There was cheerful audacity in the very site chosen for the gap, because the gates were a few yards from a watchtower and not more than twenty from a permanent sentry beat outside the bunker. Its advantages were that one of the posts of the inner gate was thick enough for the lean McCallen to hide behind when the searchlight swung his way, and the other could be crouched behind if the sentry came too near. Also, the huts were pretty close, so a quick dive to shelter was on the cards.

Well, it was here that Mac set to work with his cutters and, despite many hold-ups, he cut like cheese through the inner fence and got to work on the coiled denham wire. This, as always, was a tough proposition, especially with the poor pair of cutters available just then. There were four separate strands of the coiled wire, each strand about half an inch thick, and when cut it had a nasty habit of shooting up straight like a released spring and clawing at Mac's face. In many cases, it had to be pulled completely out of the ground into which the base of it had been thrust, and naturally the whole operation had to be conducted without audible oaths.

Every now and again, whispers from his scouts would warn Mac of danger within the camp; but not always did the direction of the searchlight permit him to nip back to the shade of the huts. Instead, he had to trust to a constant

manœuvring round one or other of the gate posts, or a full length stretch in the prickly mass of the denham.

His worst time that night, though, was when the bunker sentry strolled down to meet another guard and the pair of them stopped right outside the gate and commenced a pow-wow about *Urlabe* (leave). Wishing them protracted *Urlabe* in Hell, Mac was forced to kneel for half an hour behind the outer gate post. So close was he to the Huns that he could have touched them, and so hard did he try to control his breathing that he almost lost capacity for it. Then, severe cramp developed in his legs, and he was just debating whether to let out a blood-curdling yell, throw the Huns off their balance, and dive for the huts, when a company of Jerry troops on night manœuvres came marching up the road.

This was a signal for the two guards to separate – though it was not a signal for Mac to relax. He had to make himself a part of that post till the company had passed, and such was his success that, to his own and his scouts' astonishment, he was not noticed. Inspired by that, he cut away at the rest of the wire and by one o'clock in the morning the fence was ready for the Gallopers.

Just as he regained the shelter of H.Q., scouts reported that the Huns had changed guard and that the new man was standing stolidly right by the gate and the cut in the wire. It seemed that he would be bound to notice something fishy, but just in case he didn't, Mac gave some last tips to the Gallopers and then popped back to his own hut for a short spell in bed. At three o'clock he returned to the fence and found that the hole had not been touched, so off he went to the H.Q. hut to tell the Gallopers – only to hear that, owing to the high-risen moon and other factors, they had decided to postpone their break. It was never Mac's policy to urge men out against their hunch, but that was the one and only time he was let down by his clients. Needless to say, the gap was discovered by daylight, and from then on the Huns were fully on their guard.

And it was then that the fun really started. So far from giving up in despair, McCallen and Co. sharpened up their cutters. Time after time, at irregular intervals, men got away via gaps they had cut – and, as often as not, it was the

fence by the bunker that was breached. A fact which the Huns found annoying.

A few jumpy guards were wasteful of their ammo, and men in bed in huts often wondered where the bullets flew. But the Gallopers were lucky – as well as cool and careful – and random shots at night didn't stop them. In fact, the only Kriegie shot near the bunker was the rabbit fancier I have mentioned earlier – and he was plucking grass, not denham wire.

However, the danger of a bullet was always there, and apart from the outside sentries there were the Stalag snoops to dodge, these ferrets being anxious to keep their jobs, which, though thankless enough, were better than duties on the Russian Front.

There were some gay adventures with these inside guards, who were often quite hot on the trail of the cutters. One winter's night, for instance, McCallen, after some hours at the fence, was briefing some Gallopers in the H.Q. hut, when the snoops caught sight of his scouts. Realizing that they had been spotted in their passage-way hide-out, the Kriegies took flight, making full use of the gaps between the huts, and not omitting to warn their colleagues, who also bolted. The whole gang, including Reg Stacey who was co-ordinating that night, rushed past the H.Q. hut, closely followed by the Huns, who hadn't time to shoot but were shouting for assistance.

Hearing the row, Mac and the two Gallopers dived under beds in the H.Q. hut and hoped for the best, while every searchlight in the camp and every guard on the fence assisted the chasers, who were three in number. Dodging through latrines and alley ways and hiding under huts, all the Kriegies shook off pursuit except Reg Stacey, who led the Huns a fine old dance round Two Company while his comrades regained their huts. Reg didn't have a chance to reach his own room, but he dived unseen into a friend's hut, grabbed a pyjama jacket, put it on over his battledress and was in bed beside his pal in half a shake.

The snoops had no time to search suspected huts, because the gap in the fence was now discovered and they were bawled at to fetch their dogs. These animals obligingly picked up a false scent and went tearing up the road past the bunker, with their masters pounding hopefully behind, and McCallen and his Gallopers wishing

them 'good hunting.' The dogs, by the way, were often put off the scent of the wirecutters by the use of pepper, but the Huns eventually rumbled this device and pepper was banned from the parcels.

The Gallopers on the night of the chase were Geoff Spence, a Kiwi and Dick Pacey, two lads who were not to be discouraged by temporary setbacks. They had already tried their luck at tunnelling and had burrowed right under one of the watch towers before snoops made a last minute pounce on their hut. Now they were ready to try their luck again - this time in the guise of Belgian workers. They were fitted up with all the necessary clothes, papers and passes, and less than a month after McCallen had first cut the wire for them he repeated the performance *in the very same spot*, and this despite the fact that snow on the ground made everything harder.

Dick and Geoff got clear away from the camp and made for the valley leading to Berglengenfelde. They had some apprehensive minutes when crossing a meadow, for the ice underfoot made an appalling din, but they just carried on and hoped for some luck, which for then, at least, was granted them. Early in the morning

they took a train to Bamberg and from there they travelled to Nuremberg, nobody questioning their movements. Unfortunately, they were uncertain of the platform for Stuttgart, their next stage, and while examining the timetable they were pounced on by Gestapo, who were thick as wasps round this Nazi nest. Even then they nearly bluffed their way, for their passes and papers seemed quite in order, but what sealed their fate was that they had been notified as missing from the Stalag and a description of their appearance was with the police. Needless to say they did time in the bunker - and needless to say they made other breaks later. They were that sort of lad.

But that sort of lad was common amongst the Gallopers, and to list more names and deeds would serve no purpose. The escapees and their helpers did their job - the job of harassing the Nazis - and the proof they did it well is in those posters - the sullen Hun admission of defeat.

'Damned Dangerous Sport' - escaping was indeed. And McCallen and his men must rank as Champions.

Since the war Michael McCallen has been awarded the B.E.M. for his services in Germany.

The Yanks are Coming

NO man at Hohenfels will ever forget that April, 1945, for April was the month of Liberation.

It was a fantastic hotch-potch of mixed excitements at the time and, looked back upon now, it has all the haziness of a dream. A dream too crowded to recall.

The main facts are simple enough; but the multiple details, the tense atmosphere, the mixed emotions that coloured them defy description. So I shall not describe them. Instead, I will put down briefly the outline of events – events that led to our freedom.

In early April 1945, Stalag 383 was convalescing. The winter just past had weakened us, and though, thanks to the WHITE ANGELS, we were now getting half a parcel each per week, the majority of men were still feeble. No longer bed-bound as before, but still pretty shaky on their pins.

But who cared, anyway? The weather was good and the news glorious. We could just sit back and wait for the greatest day of all. The day when the Stalag would be freed.

As for our weakness, it was a blessing in disguise. Had not the Kommandant assured us of this: that we should stay in the Stalag to the end: that we should not be marched to other camps, even though the Allies reached the district? That was a comfort to us all, and especially to those late arrivals who had already been evacuated from Lamsdorf in Silesia to this haven in Bavaria. To 'stay put' till the end was the height of our desire.

One day in April the Allies crossed the Rhine, and from then on we lived on nerve and news. Patton's Third Army moved on Nuremberg; our hidden radios told us of his progress; a secret transmitter in the camp went into action, and messages on the short wave were tapped to the advancing Yanks.

But evidently they just couldn't get our location, so, when they were some thirty or forty miles from the camp, another means was tried to make a contact. Eddie Ramage was



detailed to escape from the Stalag, slip through the Hun lines, reach the Americans and give them some dope – the strength of the camp, the probable attitude of the Huns when the camp was reached, and so forth.

Eddie made a great effort which just failed. He got out of the camp okay and was through some new defence lines before the *werewolves* caught him crossing a canal. They knocked him about a bit, then brought him back to the Stalag, where he was straightway thrown in the bunker. He was lucky to return alive.

So what next? There was a temporary blackout on news from Patton, and rumours flew thick and fast. Most of them were pretty bright in tone, but not all. We began to wonder about the Salzburg redoubt. To wonder about the Kommandant's assurances.

And then the bombshell came. The Huns were going to shift us and previous promises meant nothing. High Command orders had arrived, it seemed, and the camp must be evacuated immediately, no matter what the general condition of the prisoners.

Hospital patients could stay, since there was no transport to move them, and a limited number of men, genuinely unable to march, would be given chits as well. But the rest of the camp must march at once. There were strong S.S. formations in the district and the Kommandant of the camp was powerless to defy them. Ruthless action was certain were the order not obeyed.

So that was that. At first, it was a sad blow to the camp and there was bitter regret that defiance would be hopeless. But we soon cheered up. There was no sense in bemoaning our luck –

and no time for it either. There were kits to pack, pals to see, plans to make at once. Perhaps, after all, it would be for the best. There might be chances for a break on the march. You never knew your luck in matters like this. At least we'd be out of the wire.

But others thought differently right from the start. Apart from the fifteen hundred or so who were admitted, even by the Germans, to be incapable of marching, there were plenty who planned to stop in the camp. Plenty who thought that any risk was better than a march to God knows where.

These Kriegies went to earth in hide-outs, choosing the weirdest places they could think of in the camp and just lying low with their rations and their hopes.

But their comrades wished them luck – and went on packing. For there was obviously a limit to the number who could hide. Unless the

bulk of the camp went on the march, the Stalag would be quickly cleared by force, and the sick and sound alike would be driven out by bayonets. Five thousand men, at least, must make the march.

And so they did. There was a night of farewell parties, blazing fires and all-night brew-ups. There was a dawn of hectic packing, map consulting and deep conspiracies – and the first batch of marchers were off, the cheers and chivvying of the rest accompanying them.

But, leaving the marchers on the road, we must follow the fortunes of the others – the men who stayed behind in the Stalag.

One of these men was that lively Aussie journalist, Keith 'Scoop' Hooper, an ever-cheerful, ever-eager hunter down of news. To 'Scoop,' then, I willingly hand over. In his own bright way he tells the story – the story of the last days of the camp.

Hiding and Hoping

by KEITH 'SCOOP' HOOPER

IN the night they'd have stolen away—those Germans at Stalag 383—and taken us with them, if they could have rounded up all the men who had gone into hiding under the barracks, in the kitchen cellars, even in the latrines. With six other Diggers, I preferred the cellars. One fellow had a hideout, though whether it was safe I leave to you. I put my foot down on what I thought was solid ground. Was it hell! I heard a grunt. So I went back and trod harder. Followed a lot of grunts, and a small voice which piped,

'Gerraway, yer stupid (I don't want to be Will Haysed, so I'll exclude the last word).'

I looked around and this I saw: a length of tube sticking from the ground. It was the voice's air vent.

Another hidey, Kiwi Fred Starkey, was above the boilers in No. 2 cookhouse. He sweated rage for three days and nights, for the cooks kept the boilers going to the last. All the heat Fred got. When he emerged, he looked like a parboiled beet. If you'd heard the way he castigated the babblers. Even the Aussies quailed with admiration at the venom. It was that poisonous!

All the time Jerry was doing a sweat too. As 'Boof' Ryan wrote in his immortal *Isle of Doom* 'the big guns roared'; but this time they were ours, at Neumarkt, 30 odd kilos from the camp. Jerry itched to get away. We prayed to stay. How we prayed! 30-25-20-15 kilos away—and the J.s sticking bayonets through barrack floors, screaming, chasing us all over the camp, men burrowing under floors, coming from under the floors, outandunder, outandunder, 'Look out! There's a Hun.' 'Raus!' 'Keep still.' 'Marsch.' 'Shut up for God's sake. You'll bring the crabs down on us.'

Wasn't it a panic! But wasn't it fun while it lasted! Pulling barracks to pieces, burning tables and stools, and all those things we made: furniture that would have made your wives green with envy—or never stop laughing;

shelves, and valuable libraries of textbooks which none of us could take with us; chess sets, draught sets, backgammon and dominoes and beautiful ornaments made from toothbrush handles. So much patient labour gone up in smoke.

How it was none of us were shot beats me. Shots whistled everywhere. You couldn't tell whether that snarl might not end in your murder. And yet, these men—that's you Hohenfellows who'd bucked Jerry all along the line, not surrendering to them even in the worst days of our hunger in Jan. '45, 'Work for them. We'll see them in Hell first.' I hand it to you, fellows. You had guts. No march into the Salzburg redoubt for you. Better a bullet here than be booby-trapped down there, or be made living landmines to catch unsuspecting compatriots. That's what Jerry intended for us. A Yank major got the gen out of a Nazi officer with more rage than thought for his skin.

Of course, the thing that made us resist was actually the fact that Patton might be with us at any moment. We expected him at noon, at 3 p.m. and every hour from then on.

He came two days later, and we had to go and get our liberators—a jeep manned by a corporal and a lance-jack.

Oh, I haven't forgotten the Thunderbolts.

All through the day they zoomed overhead, sometimes less than 50 feet high. In the hospital were approximately 1,600 men, some very sick; but sick or not, as soon as they heard an aircraft they'd rush out to look up. The pilots would dip their wings, dive and climb, shoot the German barracks just over the hill. You could hear the zip-zip of the ammo. I saw, myself, one pilot lean out and wave. Which prompted Nev Whitehead to say, 'I had one wink at me.' Oh, Nev! How could you pull that on me, your pal?

The best act of all was from Squizzy. Having installed himself as O.C. No. 2 cookhouse for the 350 'foxholers' and 'marschnixers,' he wrote on

the roof, in white letters three feet long, the words 'Camels - nothing but.'

One person missed from all this barney was McGinty. He'd have been in his eccentrelement.

Where he missed out, the racketeers got in for their chop. The civvies from Hohenfels village had a haul, at first, till a few enterprising British posted a guard of their own beside the Jerry at the gap cut through the wire opposite the bunker. They did this because the civvies would wander in as they liked and go through the barracks for loot. And loot there was in plenty. Brand-new shirts I saw strewn in gutters. New jerseys, boots, underwear, uniforms were taken back to the village by the civvies, and by Hun soldiers who changed into our uniforms to escape internment.

As I said, in came our arch-racketeers. Over the sportsplatz fence, where a pair of boots would fetch a 10 lb. sack of flour, two 4 lb. loaves of bread, 2 dozen eggs, and as much more as you might wangle out of those pfennigbound bauers.

Some fellows did better. Before the last Hun had cleared off, they were into the piggery we used to envy.

Another group, headed by one of the biggest personalities in camp, got among the sheep. As for the Russian slaveworker who always herded them, he was only too willing to give them away. Eventually he came inside the wire. Said he, 'Germanski, ich fertig. Nichts mehr.'

Seen about camp also were four Indians who had escaped from that terrible march from Poland. Some Huns roped them in to us. There were scores of Hungarians about. Hounded all the way from Budapest for slave works: soldiers, old men, women and young girls, beauties that made you cry to see their state. Czechs and Russians with only one idea, to seek revenge, waiting for the Yanks to come so vengeance might have free rein.

There was an American girl as well. She was an escaped internee. Our doctors saw she had decent care by giving her their own room at the hospital. Gee, it was wonderful to hear her speak. I can't say for Major Neal, the S.B.M.O., but there were quite a few men who looked as if they might cry at the pleasure of hearing that girl's gratitude said in English with a good, honest U.S. twang. The fellows made a formal presentation later. They carried the girl to the

jeep which liberated us, put her in the arms of the two Yank G.I.s, and said, 'Take her home with you. She's a Yank and homesick.' And didn't she bawl for joy!

I don't know her name; but I know several of you fellows took her name and address. What a story were one of the addressees to marry that girl after the war! I hope I'm invited.

In Hohenfels village there must have been three score Kriegies living with bauer families. Far from being stupid, those fellows had the right lurk. The families thought, 'If we harbor der Engländer gefangener, maybe der Amerikaner vill not molest us, Ja?' 'Ja,' said the blokes. 'You look after us. Gibt us viel Essen, we tell der Amerikaner you gut folks.' The stunt worked and the boys lived on ham, eggs and leberwurst, as much as the bauers could put on the table.

'Froggie' Bourne and I stayed two nights in the village. In 'our family' were the Mutter, an old man who kept asking us if the Yanks would kill him (he became such a nuisance we finally assured him they would 'if you don't quit bothering us'), and three pretty daughters, the eldest with a baby.

Meanwhile, S.S. troops were passing all the time in their retreat from Neumarkt. In groups of 10 or 12, many weaponless, they straggled by without bothering to give us a glance as we lolled in the house doorway. They hadn't interest more for anything but life and keeping ahead of Patton's tanks. It got that way Frog and I would go up to a Hun and ask,

'Was neues gibts?'

Invariably the Hun would shake his head and go on, licked if ever man was licked, dirty and unshaven - I'd remember our retreats in France, in Greece, Crete and Africa. But they were nothing like this. We still had spirit then. These men had nothing, except utter disillusionment.

Once, however, Frog and I were too smart. We were helping two fräuleins with two heavy sacks of flour they were carrying along the road. When we saw them, naturally we decided to muck in. Besides, we reckoned if we helped them when we reached their house they'd give us a feed. We reckoned without an S.S. general. He came along in a staff car. With him were three more Nazi officers.

He sighted us. God, how he screamed! He pulled his gat out, brandished it in our faces,

swore at the fräuleins, Verräterin, he called them. Schwein, he called us. We quaked. I thought we'd had it.

Suddenly, over came our Thunderbolt buddies. It was too much for the general. Like all Nazi rats, he couldn't get away quick enough. For mine, I was bloody glad to see him go. From then on, Frog and I did our frating with the three daughters of our host.

'Come back, you mug. They're Huns.'

That evening we heard the gunfire closer. We were in a wood on the top of a hill then, heading north to reach the Yanks if we could. The tanks were taking so long to reach us! We walked towards the firing. We saw two tanks blasting at each other. Soon one turned and drove off at a bat. The other was partially hidden by the trees.

'Let's head toward it,' said I.

We went cautiously through the trees. The tank was still partially hidden. Near-by, two soldiers were rummaging in an overturned wagon.

'Hey, stop!' said Frog.

I was ahead of him by maybe 20 yards.

'Come back, you mug, they're Huns.'

I wasn't sure.

'How do you make that out?' I whispered.

'Their helmets.'

From that distance the helmets did look like coal-boxes. Then something about the tank caught my eye. It was more easily visible now. I saw a white star.

'Huns be damned!' I shouted. 'Those blokes are Yanks.'

We tore downhill to find three other Hohenfellows had beaten us to it. I can't recall who they all were, but one was 'Sailor' Brown, the Aussie P.T. instructor.

All five of us pumped those Yanks' hands until they must have ached. Frog was crying unashamedly. Finally the tank commander said, 'Sorry men, we've got to go. But the main column is following close behind.'

They drove off and went on towards Nainhof whence came sounds of gunfire. There we met a convoy of tanks and jeeps. We flagged one to stop and persuaded the crew, a corporal and a lancejack to return to 383 with us.

You who were in the lazaret will recall the ovation those two G.I.s got. They were chaired shoulder high, cheered and cheered and cheered again. They were torn apart for souvenirs, buttons and badges. They signed autographs on letters and scraps of paper till their arms must have ached. Frankly, I don't ever want to meet those guys again. They'll slay me for taking them 'to liberate Stalag 383.'

Thank you, Keith, and allow me to add that the date of liberation for the Stalag was April 22, it being about a week later that the men were taken by trucks to Nuremburg and thence, by air, to Blighty.

And now for the fortunes of the five thousand marchers.

Oh, to be in England

THE march was preceded by a picnic. Having got us out of the Stalag by a mixture of threats and entreaties ('Don't let us end with bloodshed!' said the Kommandant) the Germans seemed bewildered what to do with us; so we dumped our kits on the ground, spread out over the fields and started a general brew-up.

The brew-up lasted for hours, and looked like lasting for ever, for if anybody felt less like a hike than we did, it was the Jerry guards.

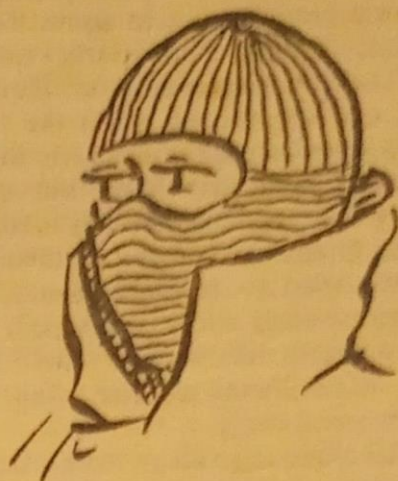
They seemed to know the war was lost. They grinned their indifference as we tore down a sentry box for fuel, raided and burnt the bunker and went foraging in the neighbourhood for food. They shrugged their shoulders as wheelbarrows, handcarts and bikes were 'won' from nowhere; and they only guffawed and gaped when a four-wheeler cab was dragged from a barn and loaded with baggage and Kriegies.

Nor did they care what was done with the Stalag. The hundreds of fellows still inside the wire were congregated at the fence, laughing their heads off at the clowns on bikes and barrows, the Aussie on the big grey plough horse, the cab and its Scottish cabbies, the looters loaded with sacks and the Derby Day atmosphere generally.

To add their bit to the fun and to help with the blazing bonfires, they threw bedboards and tables, floorboards and doors across the fences, followed by soup bowls, water jugs, blower fires, mattresses - anything to add to the picnic.

And the Huns did nothing about it. They were too busy staring at the sky. The Tactical Air Force of the Yanks was sweeping the district and the roads near the camp were being strafed. A roar of engines from behind the valley ridge, a rattle of machine guns as they raked the near-by roads, a burst of flame and smoke from something on the ground and... 'Those were Mustangs,' said the knowing.

Whatever they were, they were on our side and it was good to see them. They'd dropped a shower of leaflets round about and we picked



some up. 'Why lose your life in the last days of the war?' they read in German, and on the other side were directions for surrender. So we gave them to the guards.

The Jerries seemed impressed. Judging by their manner, the sooner they were prisoners the better they would like it. Meanwhile, though, the Americans weren't here and the S.S. were. The best plan for guards and prisoners alike was to start the march as ordered and see what happened next. Already there were rumours that the Yanks had broken through; already there were stories that the roads ahead were cut. There was no harm in moving on to see.

So at six o'clock the march commenced, and most men joined it willingly. Amused by the festive sort of atmosphere, relishing their freedom from the cage and sure that they could make a break at will, they entered merrily into the move and shelved their escape plans as superfluous.

With 'See you in Blighty' shouts to the stay-behinds and with a parting message to the Kommandant - 'We've been chucked out of better jails than this!' - they picked up their kit, straggled into line and moved slowly up the road, the cab and bikes and barrows going too.

Stalag 383 was soon behind them and the road to 'None-knew-where' stretched right ahead.

By dusk that evening (April 17) the column was well strung out and most men had halted for the night. My own section were in a village some two miles from the Stalag. We parked our kits by a

stream, cooked ourselves some supper and afterwards got chatting to some women – the first chance we'd had for several years.

They were refugees from Hungary, they told us, and very scared about the war's approach. Are Americans gangsters? Are their black troops savage? Will they harm our children? – these were the questions that they fired, with pig-tailed little Gretchens clinging to their skirts.

We tried to reassure them. The Americans were coming, soon, we hoped, but they were very decent fellows and would probably bring chocolate for the children. Only the Nazis need be worried now.

All along the village road other Kriegies were chatting similarly, while some were bargaining for bread and others seeking hide-outs in the houses. Brew-up fires were burning by the stream and little groups of men were clustered round them, planning what to do. Should they slip away and go to earth, or should they keep together in the column?

It was a ticklish problem for us all – but the guards decided for us. With startling abruptness they changed their tune. The same Jerries who had sauntered thus far with us, laughing as they told us to take it easy, were suddenly a bunch of rampant Huns, splitting the evening calm with shouts of RAUS! jumping on our precious fires, kicking over cans of tea and generally stampeding.

We soon discovered why. Another batch of Huns was just behind us – a batch whose job it was to take us over. Unless the marchers quickly toed the line, their former guards would find themselves in trouble.

Bang... Bang... Bang... went rifles close at hand, and bullets started whistling overhead. No doubt the shots were meant as warnings – and in that case they served their purpose well. We all got our kits on in a hurry, the column started moving with a jerk, the new batch of Huns assumed control and from then on the march had really started. It wasn't quite the picnic that we'd hoped.

The chief snag, apart from Huns, was kit; and most of us were clinging on to plenty. I, for instance, had a five-foot naval kitbag crammed with books, a slightly smaller kitbag full of clothes, a blanket and a greatcoat rolled together and odds and ends like haversack and bottle. Bert Gilbert, my marching partner, was travelling

light, with a mailbag of potatoes as his ballast. Between us on a pole were strung some boxes, mainly full of flour and more potatoes.

Other marchers shouldered packs like wardrobes, determined to get them home or bust; but, besides the lucky few who had baggage carts to help them, there were some who carried only food and blankets. These were ready set to make a break.

Not that their chances now looked bright. The guards were fresh and numerous, the night fairly light; the steep wooded banks on one side of the road were unscalable without noise, and the open fields on the other gave little shelter. Any suspicious move, any sound of breaking twigs, brought quick investigation – and the dogs that helped the Huns were not the type you stroke. Shots zipped through the woods at intervals all night, but we couldn't tell if any found a billet and assumed that some, at least, were German bluff.

For hours without a break the march went on, till our chins were almost banging on our knees and a fellow's boots seemed soled and heeled with lead. Mostly we plodded on in silence, but now and then we'd ask about a halt: and always the answer was the same – 'Noch ein Kilo!'

That 'One more Kilo' was a stale Hun gag – we'd heard it on the march in France and Crete – and even though they'd thought it up themselves, we didn't give them any credit now. We cursed them from the bottom of our hearts.

Those hungry months in bed had taken toll – heavier toll than most of us had thought – but even for the fittest crowd of men that non-stop march would not have been a joke. All along the route men started dumping kit, from greatcoats, packs and blankets to accordions, and every now and then the guards would rage and scream as some exhausted Kriegie slumped to earth.

At the front of the column it was sometimes possible to put a casualty on a baggage wagon, but at the rear it was a case of his friends carrying him, or of leaving him to the mercy of the round-up Huns. So naturally they'd carry him. That way they knew he'd go on living.

Not till three o'clock came the halt. We reached a biggish field, cordoned off by guards, and guessed that here at last was 'Noch ein Kilo.' The ground was under water and there were bulrushes about, but whether this was a marsh or

a feather bed made little difference. We put a blanket down, put a greatcoat on, flopped down right away and went to sleep.

But not for long. In half an hour or so, Hun boots were stirring us, shouts of RAUS! were beating at our ears, and everyone was once more on the move.

The Salzburg bogey slowly grew more solid.

BY daylight the position changed again, with the marchers fighting back against the Huns. The element of surprise had gone, the confusion of the night was over and the shouts and random shots no longer bluffed us.

All along the column passed a message, and the Kriegies acted on it to a man. At the first big village on the morning's march they dumped their kits by the roadside, opened up their packs and settled down to breakfast on the spot.

The Huns were taken by surprise. So concerted was the move that most guards thought it had been authorized and just stared blankly at each other. Then, realizing what had happened, they started raving at the prisoners, drawing back their rifle bolts, firing in the air and going through their usual noisy antics.

But no one moved. The Kriegies were determined on a breakfast and nothing short of massacre could shift them now. Nor were the Huns so keen to show their teeth. Acts that were safe enough at night would now be witnessed and remembered – as those who raised their rifle butts were quickly told. Guards who threatened individual prisoners were hustled off by others. 'Der Americans komm... Nix fergessen!' warned the Kriegies – and a lot of ersatz tempers quietened down.

Finally, Hun officers, saving face, went up and down the column announcing that there would now be a general halt and furiously berating those guards who were still shouting RAUS! from habit. This announcement drew ironic cheers from the Kriegies, and things eased up all round.

The break, the chance to eat and drink and the lovely morning air revived us wonderfully, and we had time to move about and make inquiries. But though rumours that this fellow had been shot or that fellow was missing were plentiful, the only fact we knew was that we were heading for Regensburg on the Danube.

Salzburg and its mountains (where the Nazis

were supposed to plan their last stand, with prisoners as their cover) was some two hundred kilos farther on. Some men regarded the Salzburg trap theory as authentic, others dismissed it with a laugh, but most reserved their judgment for a bit, prepared to make a break if necessary but not to risk their lives without good cause.

With the district thick with Nazis, they argued, with the position of the Yanks unknown and with no idea of their line of advance, a fellow should remember those leaflet words: 'Why lose your life in the last days of the war?'

Despite these sober sentiments, soon after the march restarted, there was a good attempt at suicide by one Kriegie who dashed wildly across a field in full view of the guards. They could have shot him down with ease, but instead, regarding him as mad, they contented themselves with chasing him, cornering him in the field and beating him up.

Later, I met him in the dusk and in asking for a light found that he hadn't got a cigarette between his lips after all: his mouth had just been bashed that shape. However, his best friends told him he was lucky.

As a compromise between reckless breaks like that and just being driven by the Huns, most men adopted 'go slow' tactics. They played a sort of leap-frog game, getting ahead in the column, resting till the round-up guards came screaming and then getting ahead for a hundred yards or so and resting again while other stragglers were rounded up. Everybody co-operated in this manoeuvre, so that the column was never moving as a whole and progress slackened down to a crawl.

That evening the tail of the column reached Pielenschule, a pleasant riverside village dominated by a high-walled convent. Planes were strafing the neighbouring roads, but more surprising than the sight of Thunderbolts was the way the van of the marchers had made themselves at home. Not only were Kriegies spread luxuriously all over the meadows, but some of them had found themselves Frauleins and were rowing them on the Regen, while others were making social calls on the villagers and bargaining for bread.

The only snag about this charming spot was that the surrounding woods were manned with S.S., which fact had been learnt from the villagers and confirmed by our own scouts.

However, it was generally agreed that this would probably be the last chance anybody had of making a break this side of the Danube, so all over the meadows obvious conspirators could be seen looking at maps, consulting compasses and discarding surplus kit.

Bert and I were joined by some old hutmates in Fred Perry, Frank Moore and John Newby, John (who had managed to keep at large on the island of Crete for a year after its capitulation) was confident that all five of us could hide up somewhere for a couple of weeks, and Fred suggested that the best plan would be to keep on this bank of the Regen and try to double back on its course, hiding by day and travelling by night.

No doubt this was a brainwave; no doubt, too, it had occurred to hundreds; but we had only got as far as the first stage, which was to dump my most precious possessions, when the Huns closed in on everybody, marched us into the convent grounds and locked us up for the night.

Still, this move proved a blessing to the weary and we made ourselves pretty comfortable under the convent trees. Despite the planes overhead, scores of fires were lit, flap-jacks and tea were cooked for supper and, after a long, refreshing sleep, we awoke in the morning wondering optimistically what the day would bring.

The first thing it brought was the S.S. Our *Wehrmacht* guards got agitated when they saw them and begged us to get moving right away. The S.S., they said, were a vicious lot and their commander was in nasty mood over the way prisoners had fraternized in the village yesterday. He was capable of anything.

We could see that for ourselves and we lost no time in getting on the road. For several kilos the S.S. followed, marching on banks on either side of the road, not shouting but just holding their rifles at the ready and keeping a cold-eyed, malevolent sort of watchfulness over every step we took. They were not bright company; some of them seemed doped; all looked fanatical and there was an 'aura of death' grimness about them that chilled their vicinity. Both we and our guards felt cosier when they finally turned back.

By this time we were on the main road to Regensburg, along with columns of Russians, Italians, Jews, political prisoners and pram-pushing refugees. The only traffic passing the

other way were occasional German Staff cars and some fat girls on bicycles. These wore Luftwaffe serge slacks – seemingly several pairs each – carried revolvers at the hip and seemed conscious that they looked a trifle odd. Of troop movements we saw no sign.

Late that afternoon we crossed the Danube, marched through much-battered Regensburg and halted on some waste ground near the city. Here some of us got chatting to some guards – and what they had to say made very pleasant hearing.

In effect, they told us that the march was over. Now that we had crossed the Danube, we should just join the general amble south; we should move very slowly; we should mark time for the Americans – and when they came, we wouldn't be more delighted than our guards. They laughed at the idea of reaching Salzburg and told us that only the S.S. were really fighting. The *Wehrmacht*, they said, had had enough.

We were just drinking this in, when a *Feldwebel* strode up and barked at the guards that they must not mix with prisoners; but instead of moving, the guards went on lolling on the bank and one of them shouted: 'We'll be prisoners ourselves soon – you, too, my friend!'

The *Feldwebel* screamed something, seized a rifle from another guard, held it at his hip and looked like going berserk, so our party promptly scattered to the winds. No sooner had Bert and I scrambled over the top of the bank than there was a loud explosion and another wild scattering by all around. The bastard's tossed a hand grenade, we thought!

But he hadn't: the explosion was an accident. Some Kriegies had been making a fire on the waste ground when a small bomb, buried in the ground, exploded in their midst. It caused some fearful injuries – as we later were to learn – and it was hellish bad luck for all concerned.

That night the marchers slept in a wood cordoned off by guards, and the following morning set out on the next stage of their journey – a stage which I was not destined to travel.

The column had not gone far along the road when Bert, who had complained of feeling ill, pitched forward on his face and blacked right out. Captain France, the M.O., was near and the outcome of his roadside look at Bert was that I was told to try and get him back to Regensburg – and hospital.

So, feeling rather glum, I watched the marchers disappear, wondering when and where I'd see them next – and hoping that those guards had not been kidding.

As soon as Bert recovered sufficiently to walk, we turned back along the road to Regensburg. Every other yard we were stopped and questioned, so we took the first chance that offered of slipping off the road – into what proved to be the yard of an inn.

Starting a brew-up, we were approached by a woman with a baby in her arms who told us: (a) that the baby was a seven months' child, due to an air raid; (b) that she was expecting another child shortly; (c) that there were some wounded prisoners sheltering in her house.

Investigating this last statement, we found that the victims of the explosion yesterday were resting here. One of them was Sgt. Honeyset. His face was completely covered with bandages, except for his lips and nostrils which were terribly burned. He had been blinded by the explosion, but his companion, 'Cracker' King, told us that there was hope that the sight of one eye would be saved eventually. Meanwhile, he was bearing his agony heroically, waiting for a chance to get to hospital.

'Cracker,' himself, had been badly pitted and burned about the face, but he could still make a wry cockney joke. 'So you caught it, too, Cracker?' Bert asked him. 'Course I did,' said Cracker. 'I'm his mucker, see? Anyfing comin' to him – I gets 'arf!'

We had just cooled the tea off and were trying to pour some down Honeyset's swollen lips, when the sirens sounded, ack-ack opened up and bombs started falling simultaneously. The woman with the baby and her old mother dropped on their knees, while some small children set up a piteous, hysterical screaming which lasted while the bombs rained down. As soon as the raid was over – it only lasted minutes – the children rushed out gleefully to inspect the damage, while the old woman begged us to put some sign on the roof so that American airmen would not bomb the inn.

Late that afternoon, a handcart arrived from a near-by British working camp and Honeyset was placed carefully in it to be taken to the camp's M.O. We others walked behind the cart and on the way we learnt that men from this

working party had been working on the railway when the bombs straddled it. There had been casualties amongst the Kriegies, but how many was not yet known.

At the camp, we were received hospitably by the lads and suspiciously by the Huns, who sent a message that if the non-wounded N.C.O.s were to leave their barn sleeping quarters, even to visit the latrine, the guard would shoot on sight. Fortunately, there were some tins about.

Next morning we heard a volley of shots and, running outside, found that a political prisoner from a group in a near-by field had just been killed. He had made a bolt for freedom and had been picked off a few yards up the road. A bare-footed Fraulein who was forking hay in the yard showed less interest than if a rabbit had been shot.

Shortly afterwards came another raid on Regensburg, during which an American bomber was hit by ack-ack. We saw bits of the wreckage floating down and then noticed that three of the crew had baled out. Painted on the roof of the barn were the letters P.O.W. and one airman, seeing this, tried to manœuvre his chute so as to land in the camp. He failed by yards and fell, rather heavily, in the road outside, Huns rushing up from all directions but not molesting him.

Before he was taken away, he left news that Patton's men were now in Nuremberg, one of the men he spoke with being the Hohenfels actor, Bob Teather, who had landed in the same M.I. room, though from rather different causes.

Bob had made a break from the march, had got well clear of Huns and could have hidden up for weeks – but for an unlucky meal. Eating a doubtful tin of meat he had poisoned himself, and at last, in fearful pain, had had to seek for aid. He was now waiting for a WHITE ANGEL motor wagon which was picking up casualties from the march and taking them elsewhere for attention.

No sooner had Bert been examined by the British M.O. and pronounced a case for hospital than the wagon arrived, in it being Sgt. Honeyset, Cracker King and other Hohenfels men. There was still some room in the wagon, so I was invited to jump in myself and, my prospects otherwise being obscure, I gladly did so.

Our destination was Moosburg, the big Stalag near Munich, and it was there, two days after our arrival, that we next had news of the Hohenfels marchers.

It was grand news, indeed. The marchers' trek was over, they were safely camped near Straubing, WHITE ANGELS were supplying them with parcels, joyful feasts and brew-ups marked their days and, barring intervention by the S.S., they were just sitting pretty till the end.

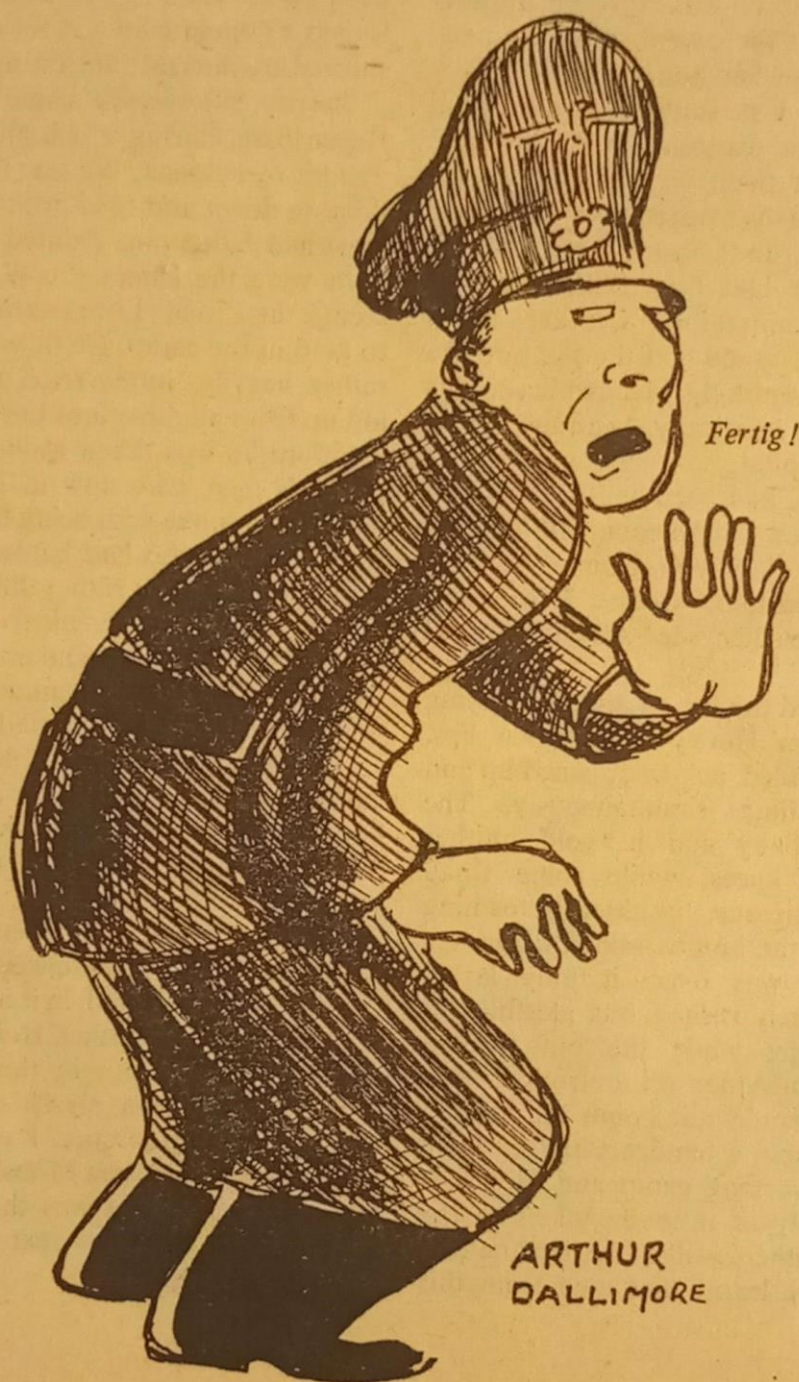
And the end came very soon. If the Hohenfels men missed the climax that we saw at Moosburg; if they missed the dramatic arrival of the Yanks, the last stand of the S.S. and a fighting finish near the Stalag - well, they didn't miss the joy of liberation.

BARBED WIRE

They were freed at the end of April. They had a fortnight to hug the thought, to go crazy, to sober up and to put on weight. Then, with beer mugs and meerschaums in their kitbags, with scores of pals' addresses in their notebooks and with almost painful eagerness at heart, they left for home.

They were flown by Dakotas to Brussels. They were flown on by Lancasters to Surrey. And the first to greet them back to British soil were the people who'd done most to ease their exile - the Red Cross and Order of St. John.

The Kriegies won't forget that friend in need.





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